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On the cover: Detail from “Manna,” a series of digital collages by Sarah Bernhardt. The artwork was part of an exhibition of her work featured at Concordia Seminary’s 2019 Theological Symposium. A St. Louis artist working in a variety of media, she is also the executive director of the Intersect Arts Center (www.intersectstl.org). For more information about Sarah Bernhardt’s artwork, visit www.sarahbernhardtart.com.

David Schmitt wrote a devotion on this artwork, available at <https://concordiatheology.org/2019/10/the-tension-of-transition/>. The full artwork can also be viewed there.

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Editor's Note

Last September, Concordia Seminary hosted its 30th Annual Theological Symposium under the theme “Devoted: (Re)forming the Devotional Life.” It must have struck a chord, because the house was packed to overflowing.

At the heart of it was a sense that we often feel an obligation to “do our devotions” as a kind of daily burden, sometimes multiplied by a weary suspicion that we could always be doing our devotions better. That sense can be no less true for church workers than it can be for laypeople. Lo and behold, almost a year later, a global pandemic—with its seismic changes to home and workplace, and a congregational life that may never get back to its previous “normal”—has likely complicated things even further.

The Symposium attempted to (re)form the devotional life, as David Schmitt’s opening plenary laid out, by broadening what we mean by “devotion,” which, interestingly enough, gets us back to a sense of reflection and practice more in continuity with what followers of Jesus Christ did prior to the literate modernity of the last century or two.

But the signature shift in this definition came in the move from noun to verb, from what we do when we do our “devotions” to what it is we “devote” our lives to. Whatever our hearts are devoted to, there lies our devotion. And every heart is devoted to something. It is then simply a matter of forming—or reforming—those devotions in light of the teachings of the faith and the contemplation of the Scriptures in ways that shape them into practices that bear fruit in the world. Dr. Schmitt further asserts that this enlarged understanding of the devotional life is increasingly urgent in light of the “three main forces that give shape to our discontented age: distraction, disenchantment, and disillusionment.”

These three forces have only intensified with everything that the Year of our Lord 2020 has brought us. Thus, it is timely to (re)visit these themes in these pages. We revisit them with a bit of bittersweetness, since 2020 will be the first year since the Theological Symposium began that we will not be able to gather together for it.

But as these times strip away everything that “hinders . . . and so easily entangles,” it does bring us back to the question: What is your heart devoted to? And how is God—in Christ, through the Spirit—devoting your heart to it?

Travis Scholl

Managing Editor of Theological Publications

Please note: On page 36 of the Fall 2019 issue of the Concordia Journal, there were several misspellings of Hebrew words where dalet and resh were accidentally interchanged. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused.

In Memoriam: David P. Daniel

On March 12, 2020, the Rev. Dr. David Paul Daniel died suddenly at home in Martin, Slovakia. A generation has passed since he served on the Concordia Seminary faculty as a professor of historical theology and as director of library services, and although his time here was relatively short—about a decade—David was an important part of this place. His academic contributions along with a broader perspective he had on church close at hand and far afield were always marked by enthusiasm and energy that added to the life of the seminary. As colleagues and friends we are pleased to remember him in these pages.

David's scholarly interests and that broader perspective came in no small part because of his roots in the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches—formerly the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Synod that later in 1971 became the non-geographic SELC district within the LCMS. His father was the last president of the old synodical conference that once included the SELC, Missouri, and others, lasting into the 1960s.

David Daniel was born on November 6, 1940, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the son of the Rev. Dr. John and Elizabeth (Lisy) Daniel. He graduated with a BA from Muhlenberg College, from Lehigh University with an MA in history, and from Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois. A Fulbright grant supported study at the University of Vienna on the way to a PhD in European (Reformation) history at Penn State University. He taught for ten years at Behrend College (Penn State) and served Lutheran congregations in Pennsylvania until 1979 when he joined the faculty of Concordia Seminary.

Along with the usual history offerings one would expect at a school in a church body with a heavy German background, David added perspective and depth with courses on the Reformation in Central and Eastern Europe which are among those who certainly had ties to Wittenberg and German Evangelicals, but who also had a Reformation of their own and embraced the gospel in their context. David relished talking about those particulars, recounting history not as abstract ideas but as a story that was personal then and practical now. Holding life at arm's length, history served as a mirror for students to compare and contrast. In addition to the classroom, he also retold the story in print, with the background literature comfortably in hand as seen in his *Historiography of the Reformation in Slovakia*. He knew that the Wittenberg movement had roots in liberal arts educational change, and then as years passed, that reform came full circle and influenced learning, and so he looked closer to home in "The Impact of the Protestant Reformation on Education in Slovakia." More, reform was not just getting dogma right, but rather it arose in and then had an effect on the wider, deeper cultural mindset, seen in "The Protestant Reformation and Slovak

Ethnic Consciousness.” He contributed numerous entries on Central Europe to the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* and laid out the basics on Luther and church in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*. And since we do not live in the sixteenth century (much as some might like to) with thinking on “church” confined to that time, he sought to bring ideas forward and recast them in idioms of today—for example, “A Spiritual Condominium: Luther’s Views on Priesthood and Ministry with Some Structural Implications,” published in the *Concordia Journal*.

Big changes began in 1988. With a Fulbright and a sabbatical, David left for Bratislava to continue work on the Reformation in Central Europe. When things began to heat up in (then) Czechoslovakia, he stayed on to help in a number of roles. Still in Communist days he taught Reformation history at Comenius University (Bratislava) and wrote for Slovak publications. There to study one revolution (the Reformation), David saw another unfold before his eyes in the “Quiet [or Gentle] Revolution,” in Slovak territory. He became an adviser for the Ministries of Education and Foreign Relations and the first director of the Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA), working with the US State Department to set up training programs for academic, charitable, and religious institutions in that new democratic context. He also helped with early contacts between the LCMS and Lutherans in Slovakia along with Central/Eastern Europe. Then in 1997 David was called to be a theological educator for LCMS World Mission and at the invitation of the Evangelical (Lutheran) Faculty of Comenius University (the EBF), he became professor of church history, helping to educate church workers for Slovakia. When the EBF looked to strengthen its practical curriculum (after decades under the old regime, confined to the lecture room without practice in the field), David was a bridge between the EBF and Concordia Seminary to find ways to emphasize praxis. When more came from LCMS World Mission—ESL teachers, for example—David lent them a sure hand navigating foreign cultural waters. And from his EBF post he reminded Lutherans there that being confessional was not embracing a historical relic but bearing witness in the present. Central Europe was not Mid-America, although there are Lutherans in both. David knew that from early on as the SELC interacted with Missouri. That kind of parallax view served David well in varied circumstances until he left his university position in 2010 and later moved to Martin. Amid so much change, not everything succeeded, but it was worth trying, always with a love of what Lutheranism had to offer.

Although the Concordia Seminary chapter was relatively short, David Daniel’s service to Lutheranism and the church was long and reached far with an enthusiasm and love for those whom Christ loves perfectly and eternally.

Robert Rosin
Richard Blythe
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Trenton, Michigan

In Memoriam: Peter L. Steinke

The Rev. Dr. Peter L. Steinke, noted author, congregational systems thinker and teacher, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis alumnus, and pastoral counseling colleague died on July 13, 2020. In 2009, Concordia Seminary honored Dr. Steinke by presenting him with an honorary doctorate, Doctor of Letters. At a luncheon to celebrate the honorees of that year, I offered the following tribute:

It is true that Dr. Steinke is a 1964 graduate of this institution. We are honoring an alumnus. But Peter's contributions have extended far beyond the LCMS.

Building on the groundbreaking work in Family Systems of the former Georgetown University professor Murray Bowen, being under the tutelage of Edwin Friedman, whose work extended Bowen's work into congregational life, and being of an essential entrepreneurial spirit, Peter has brought systems thinking into the warp and woof of congregational life. The fundamental idea of human interconnectivity, and that this interconnectivity must be part of our understanding of people and of organizations, is crucial to Steinke's work. In individualistically oriented America, attention to the interplay of individuals and how they function as groups of people, attention to the process of that function and not just to the content and words of the interaction, and self-care for the leaders of organizations so that they are less anxious than the organizations they serve—these are all central hallmarks of Steinke's work.

You, Peter, have taken these contributions far beyond the LCMS, and, indeed, have served the church catholic. Those of us who have grown by reading you, like myself, but even more so those in the church catholic who have grown by direct contact with you in supervision, workshops, training events, and consultation, have reason to rejoice with us in this the granting of to you of a Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa*.

Peter, you have traveled far and wide. Welcome home to your alma mater, Concordia Seminary.

Now, over ten years later and in reflection upon Peter's death, much of what was spoken about him in 2009 can be underlined and even magnified. Peter's legacy is a rich one. Healthy Congregations, an organization founded by him, continues to contribute to the life and vitality of our congregations. Accessible at www.healthycongregations.org.

healthycongregations.com, it offers thoughtful work and consultation concerning congregational dynamics. Peter published two additional books, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (2010) and *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (2019), since the time he was honored at Concordia Seminary. These books expanded and deepened the insights of some of his previous works, such as *How Your Church Family Works* (1993), *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (1996) and *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (2006). The new books show that his remarkable competence and keen interests stayed active as he aged.

Attention to the emotional processes of congregations and those processes in individuals led Peter to observe keenly how people and institutions behave. This then led him to attend to the personhood of the leaders of congregations. Hear him as he wrote in 2006:

People vary considerably in how they address emotionally challenging events. On the lower (immature) side, people are reactive. They blame more often; they criticize harshly; they take offense easily; they focus on others; they want instant solutions; they cannot see the part they play in problems. On the higher (mature) side, people are more thoughtful and reflective; they act on principle, not instinct; they can stand back and observe. They are responsive. Intent and choice characterize their behavior. The leader's capacity to be in conscious control over (to respond to) automatic functioning (reaction) affects the well-being of the whole community. The leader's "presence" can have a calming influence on reactive behavior. Rather than reacting to the reactivity of others, leaders with self-composure and self-awareness both exhibit and elicit a more thoughtful response.¹

We still need to hear Peter, and we can in his newest book, *Uproar*, where he takes on larger societal questions. Does this sound familiar?

Under the siege of *Uproar*, our thinking capacities decline. We even use our reason to justify the irrational. Our trusty inventory of opinions is imperiled. Truth is put on a seesaw; suspicion is overseeded. Polarized, groups find it difficult to converse without wielding emotional hatchets. Explosive tantrums throw respect to the wind. Ethics are stored in the attic—"out of sight, out of mind." God is reduced to a candy machine, easily nickled-and-dimed. Buffeted by lies, stable folks lose confidence. Normal has become a backseat driver.²

When I began to offer "Congregational Dynamics and Behaviors" as an elective at Concordia Seminary, I called Peter and asked if I could use one of his training tapes to help our students understand the basics of his understanding of family

systems theory as it applies to congregations. He graciously offered the training tape for my use in the class, a tape funded by Lutheran Brotherhood (now Thrivent). His permission to use his training tape was so characteristic of Peter: he was hopefully committed to the healthy life of congregations and was willing to share himself and what he taught in a very gracious and open way.

I believe that this openness was made possible through God's work in and influence on Peter. As he wrote as a word of encouragement to leaders:

Your ministry of leadership is grounded in the freeing gift of God's grace. In Christ, you are no longer a slave in bondage to fear. Knowing yourself to be accepted as a child of God, you are free to serve in love. . . . You can be faithful to your task because you believe God is faithful to you. Anxious times test your wisdom, your patience, and your hope. But you draw courage, knowing, "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)³

Like many others, I have been deeply influenced by and greatly thankful for Dr. Peter Steinke, his being, his work, and his contributions to the healthy life of congregations and the church catholic. We all owe him much and we still need and have his voice.

Bruce M. Hartung

Endnotes

- 1 Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 1.
- 2 Peter Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 2–3.
- 3 Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 158–159.

Articles

Devotion and Discipleship in a Discontented Age

David R. Schmitt



David R. Schmitt is the Gregg H. Benidt Memorial Professor of Homiletics and Literature at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He is professor of practical theology and chair of the practical department.

His interests and areas of expertise include preaching, the intersections of faith and culture, particularly literary culture, spiritual autobiography and the devotional life.

If you go to a bookstore and browse through the religious section, you will find more than one row of books on the devotional life. Everything from daily devotional readings to more rigorous explorations of devotional habits face the inquiring reader. In our culture of consumerism, the devotional life has become a product and there are many vendors offering what they promise will start, restart, charge, or change your devotional life.

What I find interesting here is not how many books there are on the devotional life, but the fact that there is such a need among Christians for counsel on devotion. You would think that at some point Christians would wake up and find that they have one too many books on improving their devotional life on the shelf. Yet, the devotional genre is expanding because the present need is so great. Why do Christians feel this deep need for developing lives of devotion today and how should the church respond?

This article is an exploration of devotion and discipleship in a discontented age. In what follows, I would like to do two things.

First, I would like to broaden our definition of devotion. To be clear about my argument, I believe that many Christians are dissatisfied with their devotional lives not because they lack active practices of devotion but because they define devotion too narrowly and therefore don't see the devotional lives they already have.

Second, after broadening our definition of devotion, I would like to explore how that definition interacts with the challenges of our cultural context. To be clear once again, I believe there are three main forces that give shape to our discontented age: distraction, disenchantment, and disillusionment. For each of these forces, I would like to suggest a devotional response. Other articles in this journal will offer a deeper consideration of these topics.

For now, let me define devotion as we begin our conversation about devotion and discipleship in a discontented age.

Defining Devotion

If you were to call a friend and she was to say to you, “Can I call you back later? I’m in the middle of my devotion,” what would you think she was doing? Most likely, you would picture her sitting in a quiet place, reading Scripture, and letting the words of Scripture lead her into prayer. You would probably not think that she was gardening, recycling her trash, putting up fliers to coordinate a neighborhood clean-up, or trying to manage the kids as she was driving to a food co-op to support local farms. Yet all of these activities could be forms of devotion—a devotion to the first article and to her Christian belief about the stewardship of creation. No, instead of seeing her as devoted to the first article through activities out in the world, we imagine her in a moment of devotion, marked by the contemplative reading of Scripture and prayer.

Reading and meditating on Scripture. That is our primary understanding of devotion. For me, this definition is a bit narrow. I’m not saying that it is wrong, just that it may be too narrow.¹

First, this narrow definition captures only some of what Scripture says about devotion and discipleship. Yes, devotion involves meditation upon the Scriptures, but that meditation leads into so much more. For example, consider how the apostle Paul speaks about devotion in his pastoral letter to Titus. Paul has left Titus behind in Crete to bring about order in the chaos that was the church there.² Having been to Crete, Paul knows that it is a challenging climate for Christians. People are drawn into their passions and desires until, ultimately, they are driven by them. Yet God has made his saving grace known among them in Jesus Christ. Those who once were enslaved “to various passions and pleasures” have received the “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (3:3–7). In Christ, God has brought them from slavery to freedom. Now, instead of being ruled by their passions, they are drawn into the life of the Spirit and Paul speaks about this spiritual life in terms of devotion.

Twice, Paul counsels Titus to lead the people that they might “be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and beneficial for people” (3:8 and 14).³ In a cultural context where “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (1:12) and in an ecclesial context where people are drawn to “Jewish myths

and the commands of people who turn away from the truth” (1:14), Paul encourages Titus to cultivate among God’s people a devotion to good works. Such devotion will manifest their freedom in the Spirit and such works will be excellent and beneficial for the church and the world. Devotion here is more than a contemplative life, meditating on the Scriptures, it also involves an active life, manifesting the work of the Spirit in the world.

Second, this narrow definition doesn’t mirror what the church has called the devotional life throughout the centuries. To define devotion as reading and meditating on Scripture makes sense at a time when literacy rates are high and the Scriptures are readily available. But, historically, even when literacy rates were low and the Scriptures were not readily available, God’s people had lives of devotion. Certainly, lives of devotion have been misunderstood throughout the church’s history, even as they were misunderstood in Crete when Paul wrote to Titus (cf. Titus 1:13–14), but they have also been rightly practiced, producing that which is excellent and beneficial for people.⁴ Throughout history, the Spirit has worked through the word to cultivate lives of devotion. In hymnody and art, in hospitals and charities, the works of God by the people of God bear witness to the church’s much larger definition of devotion throughout the ages.

For this reason, I suggest we consider a broader definition of devotion. Devotion is (1) a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that (2) manifests itself in contemplative and active practices out in the world.

Psalms 1 has often been used as an introduction to the devotional life. Let’s look at the beginning of the psalm, attending to how it describes devotion as both a contemplative and an active life. The psalmist begins by contrasting activities in the world to meditation upon God’s word. “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (vv. 1–2). Here, we have movement from action (e.g., walking, standing, sitting) in a world of corruption (i.e., “the counsel of the wicked,” “the ways of sinners,” and “the seat of scoffers”), to deep reverence (“delight”) for the teachings of the faith (“the law of the Lord”). This deep reverence manifests itself in contemplation of God’s word (“and on his law he meditates day and night”). So, devotion is a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that manifests itself in contemplation of God’s word.

But notice how as the psalm continues the psalmist does not stop with contemplation but moves back into action out in the world. Such action, however, is different from the action at the beginning of the psalm. Here, the psalmist broadens our understanding of devotion. “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (v. 3). Suddenly meditation upon God’s word (i.e., drawing sustenance from the “streams of water”) produces fruit in the believer’s life (“yields its fruit in its

season”). The psalm does not leave the believer in a private moment of meditation, withdrawn from the public world (vv. 1–2). No, the psalm pictures the believer, out in the world, manifesting the vibrancy and fullness of the devotional life. As God’s people meditate on the word, the word works in their lives to bear fruit in the world. One way of understanding devotion, therefore, is that devotion is a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that takes shape in contemplative and active practices in the world.

Consider, once again, our friend whom we called on the phone. What is happening when she says that she is having her devotion? First, at the heart of her devotion will lie a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith. For example, she could be devoted to the care for creation. If this were the case, at the heart of her devotion lies the teaching that God created and cares for the world and calls us to be stewards of his gifts, tending and caring for his creation.

Devotion is more than belief.

Second, deep reverence for this teaching will lead into contemplative and active practices out in the world. Her devotion could be the contemplative practice of reading Psalm 104 and meditating on the wonders of creation or praying a hymn of praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the king of creation.

Or it could be the active practice of picking up trash along a nature trail, posting information about a neighborhood clean-up, or participating in a co-op to support local farms. In both cases, however, notice how there are two qualities present: a teaching of the faith that comes to us through God’s word (read, spoken, signed, or sung) and the life that flows from deep reverence for that teaching. These two qualities are necessary for devotion. The teaching of the faith anchors devotion in God’s word; and the deep reverence for that teaching gives shape to the devotional life in a variety of ways.

The teaching is necessary because we are often tempted to be devoted to things that are not of God. If you look at our world, you will see people who are devoted, but not necessarily devoted to the things of God. For example, our culture forms people who are devoted to consumerism. They are devoted to having the latest product on the market. Some will research for hours to find the latest high definition TV. Others will camp overnight outside a store to get the latest phone. People will remodel their kitchens not because they need remodeling but because they want the latest trend in design. People’s lives are consumed with consuming. They are committed, devoted . . . but they are not devoted to the things of God. Without the word of God, our devotion can be focused on the wrong things. With the word of God, however, we are anchored in belief.

But devotion is more than belief. It is a deep reverence for a particular teaching that manifests itself in contemplative or active practices out in the world. Hearing

God's word, by the power of the Spirit, we are like that tree which bears fruit in the world or, as Paul would say, we "learn to devote ourselves" to particular teachings.

Think about how this shapes the way you look at devotion in your congregation. Sometimes, when we think about devotion in the congregation, we assess it by how many people are using *Portals of Prayer* or partaking in a program to read through the Bible. A broader definition of devotion gives us a different way of seeing things. Congregations are gathered by God around his word. In that word, there is a belief that is common to us all. All of God's people come and confess the faith that we share. We all believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, life, and salvation. We all believe in the saving work of God in baptism. We all believe in the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. We all believe that God created the heavens and the earth. We believe in the stewardship of creation. We believe in marriage . . . in God's gift of life . . . in God's care for the poor . . . in mission . . . in the resurrection of the body. I could go on and on just listing our beliefs. We all *believe* these things but not all of us are *devoted* to them.

In your congregation, the Spirit draws some people to meditate deeply upon these teachings and begins to produce in their lives the fruits of such belief. The church, then, witnesses lives of devotion that flow from the Spirit's work through God's word in their midst. For example, in your congregation, you might have a couple devoted to marriage. All of your members believe in marriage as God's gift but this couple is devoted to it. They have been married for thirty-eight years. They frequently attend marriage enrichment seminars. They have to juggle their schedules to make sure they both can attend every year, but it is important to them. The Spirit has cultivated within them a deep reverence for marriage, and not just *their* marriage, but marriage. They have asked you, as the pastor, to include prayers each week for those who are celebrating wedding anniversaries. They want those who are married to know that the church is praying for them. They have asked if they can serve as sponsors for newly married couples in the congregation. After some consideration and counsel, you encouraged them in this work. It has gone so well that now they are training other couples to do the same thing. They have even encouraged the congregation to have a support group for those who are recently widowed or divorced. Their deep reverence for God's teaching about marriage has led to a variety of contemplative and active practices of the faith. While everyone in the congregation may believe in marriage, not everyone is devoted to it.

If we were to use the narrow definition of devotion (i.e., reading and meditating on Scripture), not much of what I have described above would be considered devotion. In fact, this couple might feel like they have poor devotional lives. Yet, with a broader definition of devotion (i.e., "a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that manifests itself in contemplative and active practices in the world"), suddenly we begin to see how deep and rich their devotional life truly is and how varied the working of the Spirit through devotion can be.

Consider the variety of ways in which people might manifest their devotion to another teaching, for example, caring for the poor. For Brian, this is something he does after work. He is an engineer and on Wednesday nights he doesn't go home to his family but goes to a homeless shelter to serve dinner and to offer life skills coaching for those who want it. For Carolyn, it is part of her vocation. Carolyn is a lawyer with a prestigious law firm. If you look at her case load, you will see that she always has one case for those who can't afford her services. It is free. She believes that the poor should have adequate representation, and this is one small way that she puts that belief into practice. For Lynne, it is a regular part of her Lenten observance. During the season of Lent, she gives something up for herself and then gives something over to the poor. Devotion could be part of one's vocation or not part of one's vocation; it could be for a moment or for a lifetime.

In fact, a person's devotion might change over time. Some Christians change in the devotional practices they engage in (e.g., moving from more contemplative practices to more active ones or moving among different active practices over time). Other Christians change in terms of the teachings to which they are devoted. A couple devoted to raising children in the faith and manifesting that devotion through their leadership of the youth group may find that, after their children have graduated from college and moved away from home, they are drawn to different teachings of the faith for which they have a deep reverence and that leads them into different practices in the world. Devotion is a varied gift of the Spirit, bearing fruit in due season.⁵ Whether it is part of one's vocation or not, whether it is for a season or for a lifetime, God's people "learn to devote themselves to good works" (Ti 3:14). The Spirit raises up people devoted to the ways of God and, in doing this, the church becomes a vibrant place of varied devotion, inspired by the Spirit, producing works that build up the community and witness to the working of God.

As Paul tells us, this devotion is excellent and beneficial, for the people in the church and for the world. For example, I believe in the sanctity of life. But I would not say that I am devoted to that teaching. I had a moment in my life when I was beginning to be drawn into that teaching but it backfired on me. In high school, we were asked to give a speech in one of our classes. I chose the topic of pro-life. Now, I was in high school. I didn't know how to talk about this with maturity from a lifetime of experience. I had the political rhetoric of our culture and I had a full-size poster of aborted fetuses in a trash can and I let this class of unsuspecting tenth graders have it. Other students talked about hiking or football and I preached about pro-life. People didn't talk to me for weeks. I lost so many friends through one ten-minute speech on pro-life that I've always been somewhat wary of the topic.

But here at Concordia Seminary, there is a Life Team. This Life Team has individuals whom I would say have "learned to devote themselves" to this teaching. They have exercised leadership and care in helping the seminary attend to the gift of

How does Christian devotion interact with the challenges of our culture?

life. The efforts of these people over the years have opened my eyes to the depth and beauty of this teaching. In a culture that approaches such matters politically, with marches on Washington and angry debates, the Life Team offers another way. We see how life issues are not limited to unborn children. They

encompass matters of singleness, care for the elderly, care for those with brain disorders, suicide prevention, and more. For each of these dimensions, there are various activities that come out of the Life Team's devotion. It may be a lecture on campus. It could be a prayer in chapel. A few years ago, we had a chapel service acknowledging those who have lost a life through miscarriage. This public attention to what is often a private loss was beautiful to behold. This is the beauty of lives of devotion. They lead people deeper into these teachings and they produce materials that can serve and educate and edify the church. Think about it, the church now has prayers and services to help parents grieving the death of an unborn child. We all believe that God is the creator of life and that we are to be stewards of this gift . . . but we are not all devoted to this teaching and the devotion of some is of service to all as it opens up God's word and ways for us in the world.

I could go on and on here, but I think you get the idea. Devotion is a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that manifests itself in contemplative and active practices in the world. It is beautiful and beneficial for the church and the world.

So, if I were to have a parishioner come up to me and say, "Pastor can you help me with my devotional life?" I would not immediately offer a copy of some devotional book. Instead, I would pause, and lead the parishioner to think about a broader definition of devotion. When he or she says, "I'm struggling with my devotional life," I'd ask one simple question: "and what are you devoted to?" This question will help us discern the teaching of the faith that lies at the heart of that person's devotion and help my parishioners "learn to devote themselves to good works." Throughout our lives, we are learning, by the power of the Spirit, to devote ourselves to the things of God and this devotion produces fruit in our lives that is beautiful and beneficial for the church and the world.

So that's a definition of devotion. Now, I'd like to consider our cultural context. How does Christian devotion interact with the challenges of our culture? In what follows, I will consider how our particular cultural moment presents three challenges to the devotional life and how, for each challenge, God works through his word to reform our lives of devotion that we might live as faithful disciples in a discontented age.

Devotional Depth in a Culture of Distraction

The first challenge is distraction. In response to this challenge, the church cultivates the devotional depth of reverence.

A few years ago, I bought a book that I was unable to finish reading. The book was *Ship of Theseus* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst and I had every intention of reading it. Not only had I wanted to read it, but I had actually started an on-line book club with former students to read and discuss the work. Unfortunately, we couldn't finish. *Ship of Theseus* is a work of fiction. The fiction, however, is not just in the book. It *is* the book. When you buy *Ship of Theseus*, you get a book that looks like it has been used. There is a call number on the bottom of the spine and stamped onto the inside back cover is a list of dates when the book has been checked out. As you open the cover, items begin to fall out: postcards, handwritten lists, xeroxed pages, photographs, and even a letter. It is as if you have come upon a book that others have been reading and part of the experience is to put together the story, not just of the text but of the conversations between the people who have read this text.

As I tried to read, I found myself being distracted. I would start to read the typewritten words on the page but then my eyes would dart to a comment in the margins. I'd see what someone had written, then what someone had written in response to that comment. Each time I returned to the typewritten words, I needed to regather my thoughts. Sometimes, the marginalia became interesting and I'd find myself tracing the cursive comments written in green throughout the book or the penciled comments in block print and, again, lose sight of what was happening in the text. For me, the variety of things to read and the freedom in choosing the order in which to read them was disorienting. I was constantly going from one thing to another and that rapid movement caused me to lose a sense of coherence. I couldn't enter deeply into the story or immerse myself in the lives of the characters. Everything became superficial. For me, the way the book was constructed encouraged me to be distracted.

Now, you are not reading this book, but you are living in a digital environment that is constructed in a similar way. Neuroscientists, sociologists, computer scientists, psychologists, and communication and literary scholars are studying the effects of the digital environment upon human consciousness. Their findings are conclusive. The digital world creates a culture of distraction.⁶ There is a novelty bias built into us that rewards us for attending to information that is new and there is a pervasive design built into digital media that is always giving us something new to attend to.⁷ Over time, we cultivate the skill Maryann Wolf calls hyperattention: a heightened awareness of things that are new that draws us into switching from one task to another and creates a low threshold of boredom.⁸ It takes a lot to keep us interested. Because we become proficient at moving from one thing to another, we find ourselves constantly distracted and have trouble engaging in deep reflective thought.

Imagine you have set aside the morning to prepare a Bible study on the parables

of Luke 15. You sit at your computer with your notes before you and a document open on the screen. The news is playing on an internet feed in the background. You receive a text and respond about dinner tonight. You receive a phone call and, while you are talking, an email comes in. You answer the email as you converse on the phone and then casually surf the internet. You are constantly moving from one media input to another. Soon, you look at the clock and realize that you have had all morning to work on your Bible study but you haven't gotten anything done. You are distracted and disappointed as you sit there talking on the phone, scrolling through pictures of plastic surgery gone wrong, and you wonder "how did I get here?"⁹ In 2012, research indicated that digital natives shifted among input from various devices twenty-seven times an hour.¹⁰ Today, it is probably more. Our use of a digitally mediated culture forms us for lives of distraction.

But God calls us to lives of devotion. Devotion takes us from rapid movement among many things to a deeper reverence for one thing, a teaching of the faith. From such deep reverence flows contemplative and active experiences in the world. Unfortunately, concerns over digital media and distraction can sometimes be interpreted as resistance to technology. That is, some might think one cannot have a devotional life in a digitally mediated environment. That is not the case. We live in a digitally mediated culture. It is not a matter of moving away from digital media but rather of being intentional about its use. Digital media can, in fact, be helpful for cultivating a devotional life. But, in order for that to happen, our concern should be on cultivating the deep reverence of devotion.

For example, I have a friend who is suffering from cancer. These past few years, I have begun to devote myself to care for the suffering. In this devotion, digital technology has been useful. CaringBridge is a social media platform that enables me to access updates on her health at any time and in any place. I can be on the road and yet be up to date with what is happening in her treatment. I can share my thoughts with her or with the community that surrounds her. So, digital technology can be useful for developing an active practice of care for those who are suffering. But, in a culture of distraction, I can also use this technology in a distracted way. One evening, I was watching television and then, during a commercial, I logged in to see how she was doing. I was posting a response to a day of difficult treatment and then the commercial was over. So, I quickly finished my post with the words "praying for you" and went back to watching the television. If I had been with her in person, that would not have happened. The ease of access through the app and the cultivation of hyperattention rather than devotional reflection led me away from the practice of prayer into watching television while a friend I cared for was suffering in the hospital.

Scholar Christine Rosen calls this "'click-here' empathy."¹¹ Acts of charity are momentary experiences. Ironically, we are beginning to find them added on to other experiences, as a distraction. So, when you purchase dog food at PetSmart, you have

a moment at the check-out where you can make a donation to a pet rescue center or purchase a stuffed animal for a child suffering from cancer. These actions, while praiseworthy and good, have more in common with a spontaneous purchase than they do with the deep reverence of devotion. Rather than draw us deeper into the relational experiences of devotion, they propel us onward from a random act of kindness to the routine of making a purchase. As Rosen notes, the media platforms in which we communicate are built for speed, not slow processing. They favor immediacy and not the processing of complex emotions nor the experience of faithful reflection. When you think of the complex ways in which Christians respond to the news of the birth of a child with Down syndrome or the loss of employment due to racial discrimination, we find that the mediated environment may not be equipping us to deal with such issues through faithful contemplation. As Rosen writes, “Going to a homeless shelter or other charity organization and spending time, face to face, talking with and helping the people who stay there is a way of practicing empathy that no amount of Facebook Likes or retweets can offer.”¹² In the case of my friend, to live in a culture of distraction means that I can be informed about her care as I watch television and post a response. To cultivate the depth of devotion, however, is to be formed and transformed in a deeper way, perhaps by visiting her in the hospital, adjusting her pillow, and sitting down to talk. Through active and contemplative practices, I slowly learn what it means to be devoted to caring for those who are sick.

In a culture of distraction, where our attention is diverted among many possible experiences, devotion cultivates a deep reverence for the things of God. It focuses our attention upon a teaching of the faith and develops a way of life that flows out of that teaching. Devotion calls us into a deep relationship with God and with the way he has ordered life in this world. Cultivating this depth of devotion is one way for the church to respond to the challenge of distraction.

Devotional Discovery in a Culture of Disenchantment

The second challenge is disenchantment. In response to this challenge, the church cultivates the scriptural imaginary so that God’s people experience devotional discovery in a disenchanted world.

To describe disenchantment, I’d like to consider the painting *Root of Jesse* by Steve Hawley.¹³ At first glance, the painting looks like a still life. The viewer sees colorful fruit on a black table. Upon further reflection, however, the painting begins to play with your imagination. Hawley has created a sharp contrast between the foreground and the background. The foreground is painted realistically. You see a table with a lemon, some gourds, and a cup. Hawley has carefully attended to detail. The table is painted so realistically that you can see the reflection of the lemon and the gourds on the black enamel of the table. In the background, however, you have an abstraction. The crucifixion of Jesus is painted on a piece of paper that is fixed to the wall. The

crucifixion is formed with bold lines and thick brush strokes. You cannot make out the face of Jesus. The only thing realistic about the background is the masking tape that holds this picture of Jesus to the wall. In that one small detail we can see the experience of disenchantment. The masking tape suggests that religion is removable, not permanent. It is something abstract and tortured that you can put up or take down and its presence or removal does not change what is realistic and sitting on the table. This represents one way of thinking about disenchantment: the world exists and can be known apart from God.

Theoretically, disenchantment is understood as part of the secular project.¹⁴ Secularism grounds our meaning in the material world and our experience of it, without any recourse or reference to God. According to Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, this means that God is no longer the ground of being. The world does not proceed from him, it does not exist in him, and it does not lead to him. God is an option as you live in the world. So, when we look out upon the secular world, it is disenchanted and distant from God. Religious belief becomes something that people may do on Sundays and then spend the rest of the week living in a world that is separated from spiritual forces and from the working and the will of its creator. That's what disenchantment looks like in a painting, but what does it look like in practice?

Last year, I watched as a young girl was introduced to a disenchanted world. I was at a children's birthday party, where ironically decorations displayed the enchanted world of Disney. The adults had gathered in a semicircle in the living room while their children ran around. Annabel was sitting in the center of the circle, playing with some magnets. She was putting them together and then pulling them apart. Obviously, she was intrigued by this world. Her mother decided to use this occasion to lead Annabel into critical inquiry about the material world. She asked her, "Bel, do you know why those magnets go together?" Bel, without looking up, simply said, "Because Jesus wants them to." Her mother looked at us and, with a sigh of exasperation, said, "That's what I get for sending her to VBS!" Her mother, a non-Christian, had just been telling us how she sent Annabel to a neighborhood church for Vacation Bible School. "It's free daycare," she said. "I can drop Bel off at the church down the street and I've got an entire morning to myself. Free 'me' time." Now, however, she was reconsidering what she had done. Bel's christocentric interpretation of the laws of magnetic attraction disturbed her. As she told us, "Now I see how it works. For a week of free 'me' time, I'm going to have to pay for a lifetime of therapy." Why therapy? Because as a non-Christian, she was going to need to disabuse Bel of the notion that Jesus was ruling over all things and intimately involved in the experiences of this world.

In Annabel's world, Jesus was not an abstraction. He was real and present and had his hand intimately involved in all things. Even the laws of magnetic attraction were somehow connected to Jesus. Her mother wanted to raise Bel in a disenchanted

world, but the church had already begun its work of developing a scriptural imaginary for Bel. I'm pretty sure that, at VBS, Bel did not learn that Jesus causes magnets to hold together. That specific teaching is not often found in VBS curricula. But the church had begun to do the devotional work of cultivating within Bel a scriptural imaginary. The stories of Scripture, the images of the faith, the songs and activities and testimonies of Jesus, risen from the dead and active in the world had been deposited in her imagination. This nascent scriptural imaginary shaped what she saw in the world. She lived in a world close to and penetrated by Jesus and, therefore, understood Jesus to be holding together all things.

The point of this story is simple. We live in a culture of disenchantment. For many people, God seems distant from the world. How does the church respond to this challenge? It cultivates practices of devotion that fill our minds with the scriptural imaginary so that, like Bel, we suddenly discover God alive and active in his world.

Now, to be clear, God is *not* a figment of our imagination. God is real and has revealed himself through his word and his work in this world. As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, there is a difference between saying that "God is the property of our imaginations" and confessing that "our imaginations are the property of God."¹⁵ In redemption, Jesus Christ has reclaimed all of our being, not just our reason and our will but also our imagination. Christ has reclaimed our imagination for God. So, although God is not a figment of our imagination, God *does* use his word to shape our imagination and that scriptural imaginary helps us see things differently. This is what I mean by devotional discovery. As we meditate on his word, God shapes our imagination and God uses this sacred imagination to shape what we see in the world so that we experience a devotional discovery of his work.¹⁶ Jesus teaches his disciples to look upon a man born blind and see an occasion for God's glory (Jn 9); Luke looks at Stephen's stoning and sees a revelation of the rule of Christ (Act 7); Paul looks at the suffering of his ministry and sees treasure in jars of clay (2 Cor 4). We enter into the poetry¹⁷ and prose, the parables and proverbs of Scripture and find that they change our view of the world. Living in a world of disenchantment, devotion fills our minds with the things of God so that we suddenly discover God alive and active in the world.

For a moment, let's return to the painting, *Root of Jesse* by Steve Hawley. Upon first glance, the painting presents us with a disenchanted world. The realistic foreground of the table is separated from the abstract figure of Christ crucified in the background, held up by masking tape on a wall. If you look closely, however, you will notice one detail that depicts what I am calling devotional discovery in a disenchanted world. The torso of the crucified Christ is near the center of the painting. From his side, bright red blood pours forth. When your eye follows the blood, you see that it flows from the painting, masking taped to the wall, into the cup on the table, whose inside is painted a similar red. We discover that this realistic world, which we thought

was disenchanted, is suddenly penetrated by the gracious work of God. The cup on the table begins to look like a chalice, inviting us to taste and see that the Lord is good. Perhaps the painting of the crucifixion is abstract, not because it is not real, but because God himself is a mystery, beyond our comprehension. All that we can ever know is what he has revealed. When we see Jesus dying on the cross, suddenly we discover that Christ's divine suffering shapes our experience of this world. Ordinary life is penetrated in an extraordinary way.

Two years ago, in a sectional at our symposium, I explored the way in which Martin Luther used the stories of Scripture in his preaching, particularly his use of character. Luther had a way of meditating on a text and developing its characters. For example, he would enter into the imagination of Peter, pose thoughts that Peter might have had, ask questions, offer answers, carry on a conversation with Jesus, inhabit these characters, and bring them to life.¹⁸ What Luther was doing in preaching was developing a scriptural imaginary. He was populating our imagination with people who offered us examples of God at work in the ordinary complexity of human experience. These characters then live on the edges of our imagination and offer us possibilities for seeing God at work in the world. Reading the Scriptures, developing a scriptural imaginary, shapes how we see God at work in the world. That is what it looks like in preaching, but what does it look like in life?

Frances Young was the Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham. You may be familiar with her scholarly work on the early church: *The Making of the Creeds and Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*. You may not be familiar, however, with her more personal story of *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disabilities*. It is her memoir of what it is like to be the mother of a child with severe mental and physical disabilities. Although you might be familiar with her scholarly work but not her memoir, the two really belong together. When Young was working on her PhD at Cambridge, she gave birth to Arthur, and when he had trouble breast feeding, she began to discover his disabilities. He would never be independent. He wouldn't walk. He was limited in speech. He suffered from profound mental and physical disabilities.¹⁹ This means that during her time as a scholar, an author, a university professor, department chair, dean of faculty, and pro-vice-chancellor of the university, she was also a mother always caring for a son with severe learning disabilities. She did this for forty-five years.

As Young describes it, her husband kept her grounded. He was a scientist and not a believer. He taught her to view such things through a scientific lens. Science said that this child was an anomaly. A random mismatch of genetic material. Odds are that it would not happen again for her and it didn't as the other two children proved. So, her husband protected her from some imaginary Christian consolation, from a sentimental way of approaching this situation.²⁰ He taught her to see and to live with the reality of the world. As she records his advice, she says, "Accidents

In a culture of disenchantment, devotion builds our scriptural imaginary that we might discover God present and active in the world.

happen, and you just have to make the best of it. Acceptance of the situation, courage in coping with it, getting the maximum human value out of it is all that matters.”²¹ But her vocation as a theologian and scholar, her meditation on scriptural texts, raised different questions and, ultimately, caused her to see things in a different way. For Young, if Arthur is just an accident, a random mismatch of genetic material,

that’s one thing. But, if this child is a gift of God, that’s another. And so, as she says, Christianity led her “into ever deeper agonies over the state of the world . . . questions and difficulties which the non-believer never has to face.”²² For Young, this was not just about seeing the reality of the world and responding accordingly. It was about discovering the reality of God in the reality of suffering in this world and responding in faith.

Young’s memoir and her book, *Brokenness and Blessing*, offer a glimpse into how God works through the scriptural imaginary to bring about devotional discovery for her. In *Brokenness and Blessing*, Young meditates on the story of Jacob wrestling the angel of God.²³ She begins by looking at the story through the eyes of modern exegesis. She records how it is considered a strange interweaving of animistic stories about river gods that prevent people from crossing the river, stories about ghosts that inhabit the night, and etiological narratives giving origin to food taboos and the naming of rivers and people.²⁴ Then she contrasts that detached and modern analytical reading of the text with *Wrestling Jacob*, the devotional hymn of Charles Wesley. Wesley’s pre-modern contemplation offers a different way of experiencing the text. Rather than analyze and explain, Wesley meditates. So, Young decides to meditate, to break bread with the church fathers and learn how to chew on this story.

Through such meditation, Young discovers that this story offers a theophany, a call to mortal struggle, a journey to Christ, and then ultimately a confession of the crushing limitations of being human in the presence of the divine.²⁵ At the end of her chapter, she raises her eyes from the text to look on the world and offers a personal reflection on her life as a biblical scholar and a mother of a son with profound disabilities. She is no longer standing outside the Scriptures reflecting on their meaning but, rather, she is standing inside the world created by the Scriptures and governed by their God. She is there, alongside Jacob and alongside her son, standing before God, an empty vessel being filled with God’s suffering love. As she writes, “I stand alongside him, as a vulnerable creature, disabled and mortal, knowing my creaturely limitations and my lack of knowledge, especially of God. . . . yet again

and again, I find myself lamed and blessed.”²⁶ In the end, her “journey through the wilderness” led her “to the cross as the place to meet God.”²⁷

Elizabeth Barret Browning, in her semi-autobiographical poem, *Aurora Leigh*, once said that “Earth’s crammed with heaven, / And every common bush is afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.”²⁸ Meditating upon the Scriptures, filling one’s mind with its poetry and prose, cultivates a way of seeing the world. With a scriptural imaginary, we are led into moments of discovery, so that, whether one spends a lifetime caring for a child with disabilities or one is just sitting for a moment on the floor watching a child play with magnets, there is a reason to take off your shoes. In a culture of disenchantment, devotion builds our scriptural imaginary that we might discover God present and active in the world.

Devotional Disciplines in a Culture of Disillusionment

The third challenge is disillusionment. In response to this challenge, the church develops devotional disciplines so that, in a culture of disillusionment, God’s people experience hope.

Since the time of Augustine’s *Confessions*, people have mapped the interior spaces of their faith experience through spiritual autobiography.²⁹ These autobiographies offer us conversion narratives, telling how God has brought people to faith, and de-conversion narratives, telling how people have fallen away from faith. Recently, however, another type of narrative has become popular: narratives of disillusionment.³⁰ These are autobiographical reflections of Christians who are falling away from faith. These stories are not of people who *have* fallen away but of people who *are* falling away. In radical honesty, they explore both their doubts and their desires to hold on.

Historically considered, disillusionment is not new to the church. The church has always had conversations such as these and these conversations have given us language to use when we need to put into words that which we would rather not say: the dark night of the soul, *tentatio*, *Deus absconditus*, or the apophatic way. Although narratives of disillusionment are not new to the church, they have recently become popular. Writers who once assured us that God was present in the world are now telling us that they think this might all be an illusion and that they are walking away. These books win awards and top bestseller lists.³¹ The experience of falling away from faith has popular appeal and *that* should give us pause. In popular culture, disillusionment resonates with readers and I want to listen in on that conversation. Why? Because this is not merely a publishing trend. It is a reflection of what some in our churches are experiencing.

We have all heard the numbers. In the Western world, Christianity is declining. News outlets frequently update the church with the statistics. Whether one hears reports from the Pew Research Center or Gallup, Christianity is depicted as

declining and that decline is understood statistically.³² Such numbers are shared within denominations as well. Church leaders report congregational vacancies and closures; theological schools report a decline in admissions for church vocations; and congregational leaders report declines in church attendance. These reports can draw our attention toward numbers, and that's unfortunate, because we don't minister to numbers. We minister to people.³³ For that reason, I would like to listen to a few of these popular writers who chronicle their experience of disillusionment. Their narratives provide us with a glimpse into the sensibilities of disillusionment, and that may help us be more discerning both as we interact with those who struggle with faith and as we consider a devotional response.

In narratives of disillusionment, two themes are important. First, the disillusioned express their desire to be heard and mourn how hard it is to gain a hearing. In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans notes how difficult it was to share her experience of disillusionment with fellow believers: "It became increasingly clear that my fellow Christians didn't want to listen to me, or grieve with me, or walk down this frightening road with me. They wanted to *fix* me . . . and send me back to the fold with a painted smile on my face and tiny cymbals in my hands."³⁴ In these autobiographies, the disillusioned express how quickly Christians want to silence the one who is struggling. They may offer a quick platitude about "the dark night of the soul" or about how "everyone goes through that struggle"³⁵ and shut down the conversation. Or they might express polite shock and shame the other person into silence. Either way, the conversation ends. Whether dismissed with platitudes or silenced with shame, the one crying out is marginalized and not heard. Such a response from Christians is understandable. To question the viability of faith is dangerous and, therefore, Christians have cultivated a certain volatility to questions of viability. Yet, when the cry of the disillusioned is no longer heard, the church becomes an even more formidable place. Faith is expressed *only* with confidence, and those who question, those who struggle to put what they are feeling into words, are left standing outside where they struggle alone.³⁶

Scripturally considered, this is ironic. From Gideon testing the angel of the Lord (Jgs 6) to the father who cries out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mk 9:24), Scripture records the cries of the doubting and disillusioned for our faithful meditation. Consider the psalter and, in particular, Psalm 88. The psalter offers us an array of powerful human experiences. In lament psalms, for example, the psalmists give voice to pain that you would think was unutterable. But then, somehow, near the end of the lament, there is always a turn and one is reassured of God's presence. Psalm 88, however, is different. It has no turn and that is what makes this psalm so painful. After a withering experience of the inscrutable ways of God, the psalmist ends by saying, "Darkness has become my only companion" (v. 18). In spite of its pain, I am thankful this psalm is included in the psalter. In fact, I am thankful it is

included because of its pain. Surely, whoever edited the psalter knew that this psalm literally ended in darkness. Yet, they didn't tack on a happy ending. No, instead, they let it stand and end in painful silence. By including this psalm in the psalter, the Spirit prevents God's people from ever forming a community where the voice of one crying out in disillusionment is not heard. The Scriptures give such people voice and, wherever the people of God gather to read the Scriptures, they will hear these cries from its pages and be formed to listen when the disillusioned cry out today.

When we listen to narratives of disillusionment, what do we hear? First, we hear how the disillusioned desire to be heard and struggle to gain a hearing. For that, the church listens to the Scriptures which open her ears to listen more closely. Second, we hear how the disillusioned find value in rituals. These narratives invite us to see the disciplines of devotion in a new way.

Frequently, in narratives of disillusionment, the disillusioned haunt the habits of faith. For example, consider how Lauren Winner introduces her meditations in *Still*. She writes, "On the days I think I have a fighting chance at redemption, at change, I understand it to be these words and these rituals and these people who will change me. Some days I am not sure if my faith is riddled with doubt or whether, graciously, my doubt is riddled with faith. And yet I continue to live in a world the way a religious person lives in the world."³⁷ Holy days, liturgical feasts, and habits of prayer and charity remain part of Winner's daily life and these rituals become sites of action and contemplation for her. In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans uses the seven sacraments of the Roman and Orthodox tradition as a way of reflecting on her struggles with faith: "It seemed fitting to arrange the book around the sacraments because it was the sacraments that drew me back to church after I'd given up on it . . . the tangible, tactile nature of the sacraments invited me to touch, smell, taste, hear, and see God in the stuff of everyday life again."³⁸ In *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor rediscovers the practice of the Sabbath.³⁹ Repeatedly, in these narratives, the disillusioned return to the disciplines of devotion and the rituals of faith.

At first, this seems strange. For those who aren't struggling, this looks like hypocrisy. We are so enculturated to value authenticity that we want those who practice the disciplines of the faith to be fully and wholly committed to what they are doing. The last thing we want is for faith to be reduced to a ritual performed by rote. I think about college and a conversation I had with my roommate about prayer. When I went to college, my time for prayer and reading Scripture was determined by my mood. When I was interested in reading and meditating on Scripture, I would do it. When I was not interested, I would not. It worked for me. My time reading Scripture and entering into prayer was fervent and powerful, because I was intent upon doing it and interested in listening to and speaking to God. This act of devotion was my delight. For my roommate, however, prayer was a discipline. Every morning, my roommate would read the Scriptures at his desk. If he had something to do early

that day, he would get up even earlier to read Scripture and pray. It drove me crazy, because I couldn't figure out how you could *always* be interested in reading Scripture at the same time every day. It just didn't make sense. Then, one day, as he was sitting at his desk and pulling out the Scriptures, I asked him, "how can you always be interested in reading Scripture?" He replied, "You're assuming I'm interested." Shocked, I said, "you're not?" He answered, "not always." "Then why are you reading Scripture?" I asked (and, at this point, I was beginning to get angry because it seemed rather hypocritical to be reading Scripture if you were not interested in doing it). He said, "because I bring myself before God every day. If I'm not interested, then that is what he has to deal with this day. I don't stop being his child because I am having a bad day. I still come and place myself before him and say, 'This is what you've got to work with today.'"

That conversation changed my perspective about devotion and discipline. I had thought that you had to be personally invested in devotional disciplines—because obviously for me it was the personal investment that made these genuine and authentic and beneficial. But, perhaps, sometimes it is the practice itself that is important. In times of disillusionment, the discipline itself may be good. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has the satanic figure, Screwtape, make this observation of Christians engaging in disciplines in times of disillusionment: "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks around upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."⁴⁰ Rituals are a gift to the lost and the weary. Even though one experiences God's absence, one continues to follow his footsteps in the world. These disciplines give shape to our lives, particularly when we are struggling.

Consider Naomi. For me, Naomi is the patron saint of disillusionment. She inhabits that difficult space of following and yet falling away. Her experience in Moab has left her bitter and bereft of God. When she hears that the Lord has visited his people in Israel, she returns to Bethlehem. Upon arriving, however, she finds herself on the edge of the communal conversation. The townspeople are stirred. They speak about her, rather than to her, asking one another "Is this Naomi?" (Ru 1:19).⁴¹ Naomi, however, has her own tale to tell and it is a narrative of disillusionment. She is changing her name from pleasant to bitter, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with her. She went away full but the Lord has brought her back empty. The Lord has testified against her and the Almighty has brought calamity upon her. Empty, bitter, disillusioned, Naomi returns to Bethlehem.

Yet, in Bethlehem, Naomi experiences another encounter with God. She begins to dwell in the disciplines of Israel, and it is in the order created by these disciplines that God does his work. God's laws have a way of feeding the hungry: leaving behind grain for the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners (Dt 24:19). In Ruth's gathering

of the gleanings, Naomi finds herself fed. God's laws have a way of redeeming property in the case where there is no heir (Nm 27:8–11). In a ritual transaction at the city gate, Naomi finds her property redeemed. More importantly, God's laws have a way of redeeming people, raising up an heir for the deceased (Dt 25:5–10). In the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, Naomi finds herself blessed by God and given a redeemer. Because God's word shapes the lives of his people, when Naomi returns to Bethlehem and lives in these habits of faith, the Lord is at work. God works, in the midst of her disillusionment, in his own mysterious way.

Disciplines of devotion are a way of life for the disillusioned when everything else has been shattered. Some might call this hypocrisy. I would call it hope. On the one hand, going through the motions is not ideal. But, on the other hand, going through the motions is not necessarily bad, particularly when the motions are worth going through. A recently divorced mother may wake up and not feel like a mother. She may feel like a failure, abandoned by both her husband and her God. Yet she goes through the motions of being a mother. During the week, she gets up and prepares the kids for school and herself for work. On the weekend, she brings what is left of her family to church. She goes through the motions.

Yet, these practices give shape to her life, her relationship with her children, and her relationship to God. This is how she holds on to God's design of the world even when she questions whether God is holding on to her. God's ordering of things is good and devotional disciplines help her abide in that goodness when her life is filled with pain.

I have often wondered whether the church has moved too quickly from Good Friday to Easter. We have not cultivated for our people an understanding of the painful paradox of Holy Saturday. Holy Saturday is that time when disillusionment and discipline are joined together. Consider what it was like for the disciples. Jesus had died. His body had been buried. After three years of miracles, signs, and wonders, it was suddenly over. Yet, in the midst of this disillusionment, they observe the Sabbath (Lk 23:56). Disciplines are the way of discipleship in the midst of disillusionment. They help people maintain a relationship with God when the world is bereft of God. Luke invites us to meditate on this paradox of discipleship in the midst of disillusionment in his account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples meet a stranger on the road and voice to him their disillusionment. After recounting what has happened, they say, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). In the midst of this disillusionment, however, they continue to practice the disciplines of faith. When the stranger acts as if he is going further, they press upon him and invite him in. There, in the breaking of bread and in

*God works, in the midst of
her disillusionment, in his
own mysterious way.*

the discipline of hospitality, Jesus makes himself known and, for a moment, they see their hope fulfilled.

Conclusion

This article has been a simple study of what devotion might look like in our cultural context. Today, when people look at their screens, they find themselves distracted. When they look at the world, they find it disenchanted. When they look at the church, they find themselves disillusioned. For such people, the church brings God's gift of the devotional life. Devotion is a deep reverence for a teaching of the faith that takes shape in contemplative and active practices in the world. By the power of the Spirit, God's people "learn to devote themselves to good works" (Ti 3:14). In such devotion, the Spirit draws people from distraction into deeper practices of reverence, from disenchantment into discovery of God's work in the world, and from disillusionment into the disciplines of faith that form a way of life called hope. My prayer is that our understanding and handling of devotion will equip God's people to live in the world, devoted to the things of God and discovering his ways and his work in the world.

Endnotes

- 1 For a more detailed consideration of how to define devotion, see my essay "Devotion and Community: Thresholds of Faith" in *Inviting Community*, eds. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013): 107–121.
- 2 Depending on how one translates *τὰ λείποντα ἐπιδιορθώσῃ* (1:5), Paul is either concerned that Titus address deficiencies among the churches or that he correct defects that are still present among the people.
- 3 The language Paul uses (*φροντιζῶσιν* and *προΐστασθαι*) carries with it both the qualities of careful sustained thought and the exercise of exemplary care.
- 4 As the Confessions bear witness, the reformers were aware of both the misguided valuation of devotional practices (e.g., the discussion of monastic vows (e.g., Ap. 27.69)) and the appropriate cultivation of lives of devotion (e.g., the discerning discussion of human traditions (e.g., Ap. 15.42–48) and the general admonition that "we make use of God's Word and exercise ourselves in it" (LC, "The Ten Commandments," 87–88)).
- 5 For a consideration of the difference between our cultural emphasis on a person's passion that leads to self-fulfillment and the church's cultivation of devotion that leads to self-sacrifice, see my essay "Devotion and Community," 114.
- 6 For popular introductions to the discussion of digital media and distraction, see Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018); Mary Aiken, *The Cyber Effect* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018); Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism* (New York: Penguin, 2019), and Dominic Pettman, *Infinite Distraction* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).
- 7 Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 12–13.
- 8 Wolf, *Reader*, 71.
- 9 This example is imagined but for a real-life account and analysis of this kind of experience, see Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 11–30.
- 10 C. Marci, "A (Biometric) Day in the Life: Engaging across Media," paper presented at *Re:Think 2012*, New York, March 28, 2012.

- 11 Christine Rosen, "Expose Thyself! On the Digitally Revealed Life," in *The Hedgehog Review* 20, no.1 (Spring 2018): 44.
- 12 Rosen, "Expose Thyself!"
- 13 For an image of the painting, see Steve Hawley, *Root of Jesse* (1985–1986), Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/root-jesse-10121>. Accessed July 24, 2019.
- 14 This article is not seeking to trace the history of disenchantment but rather to highlight the popular cultural experience of it. For the intricate and by no means agreed upon analysis of secularity and disenchantment in the Western world, see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Taylor's essay "Disenchantment–Re-enchantment" in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 287–302; Taylor's discussion of "the great disembedding" in Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), chapter 4, 49–67; and James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), especially chapter 3, 60–78. For recent literary studies that challenge any simple interpretation of secularity and religion, see Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fictions in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), and Christopher Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 15 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 44.
- 16 Time does not permit a study of the art of meditation in Scripture, but a careful reading of poetic and prophetic texts reveals the creative ways in which events in history and scriptural accounts are reflected upon, amplified, and elaborated, so that the world is seen anew. This is more than a matter of retelling God's master story. Meditation upon the Scriptures involves both faithful reflection (credal) and improvisational imagination (creative) as one discovers God's presence and work in the world.
- 17 In his work on preaching the psalms, Walter Brueggemann describes the development of this scriptural imaginarity as the "counter-world of the psalms" that changes and challenges how we approach the world. Using Ricoeur, he tentatively classifies the function of these psalms in the life of faith as songs of orientation, songs of disorientation, and songs of reorientation. See Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 8–35 and 149–175.
- 18 Martin Luther, "Fifth Sunday after Trinity. First Sermon" in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, Vol. 2, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996): 283–294.
- 19 Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014), chapter 1.
- 20 Young notes how Christians can be mistaken, deluded "into never facing reality, into false hopes, into a sentimental and unrealistic optimism about things." Young, *Arthur's Call*, 37.
- 21 Young, *Arthur's Call*.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 As noted earlier, Young's life as a scholar and a mother are woven together in these works. In her memoir, Young meditates on the appropriateness of the story of Jacob for her experience (38–39) and, in *Brokenness & Blessing*, she concludes her meditation upon Jacob with a glance at her personal life.
- 24 Frances Young, *Brokenness & Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 41–42.
- 25 Ibid., 43–48.
- 26 Ibid., 59.
- 27 Young, *Arthur's Call*, 97. In her memoir, Young meditates on how her experience with Arthur drew her deeper into the suffering of God (chapter 5), where she thanks God that "Arthur has thus been the catalyst

- for deepening insights into this, the very heart of the gospel of Christ” (121).
- 28 Elizabeth Barret Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7.821–823.
- 29 For a recent introductory overview of the literature of spiritual autobiography, see Colby Dickinson, *Theology as Autobiography* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020); for a perceptive exploration of the dynamics of such writing, see Alan Jacobs, *Looking Before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).
- 30 For this article, I am thinking particularly of the following accounts: Kristin Ohlson, *Stalking the Divine* (New York: Plume, 2005); Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007); Lauren f. Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-faith Crisis* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012); and Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015). Technically, I would consider these accounts memoirs, a subcategory of autobiographies, in that they are recording a particular moment in life rather than the whole of one’s life.
- 31 Kristin Ohlson’s *Stalking the Divine* won the American Society of Journalists & Authors Nonfiction Book Award and Rachel Held Evans’s *Searching for Sunday* won the Christianity Today Book Award for Spirituality.
- 32 For example, see Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Oct. 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>. Accessed June 1, 2020.
- 33 Barna Group has done a very effective job of personalizing the numbers in their recent works. See David Kinneman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); David Kinneman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); and Barna Group, *Churchless* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014).
- 34 Evans, *Searching*, 52.
- 35 Winner, *Still*, 119.
- 36 In many ways, these narratives of disillusionment revolve around a desire for community where radical honesty and human being is not a threat to faith. See Evans, *Searching*, 31, and 66–73; Winner, *Still*, 175–181; Ohlson, *Stalking*, 26–27 and 245; and Taylor, *Leaving*, 119–120, 153, and 208–209. Also, expression of disillusionment usually results in the formation of a new community of individuals who have had similar experiences, as in Evans, *Searching*, 80–84.
- 37 Winner, *Still*, xiv.
- 38 Evans, *Searching*, xvi.
- 39 Taylor, *Leaving*, 134–142.
- 40 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 40.
- 41 Notice how the question itself puts Naomi at a distance. They do not ask, “Are you Naomi?” but “Is this Naomi?”

The Psalms and My Devotional Practice

Timothy Saleska



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and the history of exegesis. He is particularly interested in the book of Psalms, namely how Christians read and meditate on them, and the history of their interpretation in the church. Saleska's latest publication is *Psalms 1–50 Concordia Commentary* (Concordia Publishing House, 2020).

*Praise the Lord!
But you have rejected us and
disgraced us!
How long, O Lord . . .
Will you forget me forever?
But for me, my feet had almost
stumbled.
Praise the Lord!*

Part One

In order to tell you *why* and *how* I read psalms in my devotional practice, and in order to provide you with some direction in your own devotional practice, I first need to describe how I experience my own life and how I see God in it. To help me, I am enlisting the philosopher and psychologist, William James, and his series of lectures entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹

In Lectures 4–7 of *Varieties*, James divides people into two groups, depending on which side of the “miserly line” that they habitually inhabit. On one side of his misery line are people whom he calls the healthy minded, the optimists, those who live on the sunny side of life. On the other side of his misery line are the melancholy, the depressed, those who are dogged by darkness and apprehension. Those who have Despair.com as their home page.

On each side of the misery line, James describes a spectrum of experiences within

which people might fall. There are both shallower and profounder levels on each side of the line to which people sink or rise.

Although James gives many examples in his descriptions of the various experiences people have, I need only tell you that by nature and temperament I naturally fall on the sunny-side of things. I am one of those people who, as James puts it, seem to have started life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to my credit (128)—organically weighted on the side of cheer and not given to lingering too long over the darker aspects of the universe.

So, when I was a kid, I never felt like my sin was that big of a problem. Of course, I had been taught that I was nothing more than a poor, miserable sinner. But I rarely felt like I was a poor, miserable sinner. I also knew that since God forgives all my sins, they can't hurt you anymore. Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven. I knew this truth, and I didn't beat myself up too much on the matter of sin.

And because I grew up in the placid environment of a small town, I didn't see many people in the grip of obvious, terrible sin, nor was I aware of the injustices suffered by so many. James describes me pretty well when he writes, "We [sunny-siders] divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughterhouses and indecencies . . . on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize . . . is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is" (88). God's in his universe—all's right with the world.

But lo and behold, I grew up. When I was a kid, I didn't know what I didn't know. But I found out soon enough. Bad things happen to good people . . . all the time. I was a young, naïve pastor, and so I couldn't avoid walking with the desperate and despairing into their frightening shadows. In addition, I kept seeing people do crazy things to damage themselves and their relationships. I wanted to serve them too, even when I didn't particularly like them. So, I found myself stepping into shadows that I hadn't much noticed before, even shadows in my own heart. Things happened to me personally and to my loved ones that I still struggle with. As a result, I have sometimes found myself drifting to the other side of James's misery line, and some days I am not sure why.

James sees the dark side of the misery line as truer to broad human experience, and I agree. People who live on this side of the threshold view life differently than those who live on the sunny side. From the perspective of the dark side, evil is not an extra add-on but more radical and general. No superficial rearrangement of the inner self or no alteration in the environment can cure it, and so it requires a supernatural remedy (127).

A person of this sober-minded temperament cannot so easily throw off their consciousness of evil (126). James carefully listens to what people say about the secrets of their own prison-house and asks, "In the healthiest and most prosperous existence,

how many links of illness, danger, and disaster are always interposed? Unsuspectingly from the bottom of every fountain of pleasure, as the old poet said, something bitter rises up: a touch of nausea, a falling dead of the delight, a whiff of melancholy . . .” (128). People on this side of the misery line, he says, realize that *life and its negation* are beaten up inextricably together. Because of this, all natural happiness thus seems infected with a *contradiction*. The breath of the sepulcher surrounds it (131).²

To give you a personal example: It is mild in comparison to the horrors that the world delivers daily, but it illustrates James’s point. My daughter, JoJo, got married a couple of years ago. She is our youngest child, and since Di and I have been to a gazillion wedding receptions, we know what it takes to throw a good party. (Hint: it takes a lot of money). But, since this was the last wedding we’d ever have to pay for, we decided to go out with a bang. The day was amazing. My family was all here. My mom and dad were the last couple standing in the traditional “who has been married the longest dance.” The groom’s grandparents were a close second. Deep into the evening, I was sitting by myself relaxing, watching everyone dancing and laughing, and I thought about how wonderful the evening was. I felt content. But contentment has a short shelf life. Out of the blue came a bit of pessimism: “Yes, but it won’t last.” I thought. “Something will happen, and the scales will shift.” You see, a touch of melancholy accompanying my joy. A bit of contradiction.

Sure enough, a month later my son-in-law’s grandfather, the second to last man standing at that wedding banquet, died suddenly. Three months later my dad, the last man standing at that wedding banquet, died just as suddenly. There is this oft-cited passage in James’s lectures which administers a bitter truth serum to those of us who like to deny the obvious. James writes, “Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, *and the skull will grin in at the banquet*” (132).

And the skull will grin in at the banquet. This awareness of the contradiction of a life tinged with inevitable death can strike someone quite unexpectedly.³ The philosopher, Bryan Magee, describes his own shift from one side of the misery line to the other. On the surface, he was on the sunny side of life’s misery line. He enjoyed good health, rewarding work, and plenty of money.

But in the middle of all this he became overwhelmed by the sense of his own mortality. He says that the realization that his death was inevitable hit him like a demolition crane. He could no longer understand how everybody could live with everyday cheerfulness. “In a short time, every one of them will be dead,” he said, “either a heap of ash in an urn or a corpse rotting underground with worms wriggling in and out of its eye sockets. . . . Why aren’t they overwhelmed by the horror at it? Why don’t they seem even to mind?” (253).⁴

Magee craved for his life to have some meaning (229). And the thought terrified

For some people who live at the far end of the misery spectrum, the inevitability of their death and the meaninglessness of their life becomes too much to bear.

him that life just might mean nothing at all, that the whole thing could be just arbitrary, accidental, and meaningless.⁵

For some people who live at the far end of the misery spectrum, the inevitability of their death and the meaninglessness of their life becomes too much to bear. They come to hate life, and suicide starts to look like a viable option.

It happened to the Russian author, Leo Tolstoy. The more he lived, the more he became convinced that the idea of human progress was nothing but a superstition and a failure to understand life as it really is. The death of his brother brought Tolstoy to the edge of crisis. Tolstoy describes his brother as an intelligent, kind-hearted man who became ill at a young age, suffered for over a year and died in torment without having understood why he had lived, and still less why he was dying. No theories provided Tolstoy any answers to these questions during his brother's slow and torturous death.⁶ Like Bryan Magee, he searched to find meaning in life. He realized that his questions—Why? What comes next? What's the point?—are the most important and profound questions in life. But no matter how much he thought about them, he couldn't solve them. He couldn't resolve or find his way out of this contradiction.⁷

"Life had grown hateful to me," he says, "and some insuperable force was leading me to seek deliverance from it by whatever means."⁸ "I was like a man in a wood who is lost, and terrified by this rushes around hoping to find his way out, knowing that with each step he is getting more lost, and yet unable to stop rushing about. It was all quite dreadful. And so, in order to escape from this horror, I wanted to kill myself."⁹ As the British band Tears for Fears sings:

And I find it kind of funny, I find it kind of sad
The dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you, I find it hard to take
When people run in circles it's a very, very
Mad world, mad world.¹⁰

This is not only a modern problem. Nor is it a problem only for atheists. Belief in an almighty God doesn't solve the problem. It just enables a daunting theological interpretation of it. For example, Qohelet, the son of David, well aware of God's almighty power, nevertheless lived on the dark side of the misery line with the thoughts that haunted Magee and Tolstoy. Qohelet anguished over the perplexing

contradiction of a life shadowed by certain death. Life in circles, seemingly going nowhere. What did he see under the sun? The vanity of work (2:19; 3:9); the perversion of justice (3:16); oppressions and oppressors without comfort (4:1–2). Unlike the sunny-sided folks, Qohelet sees meaninglessness (הבל) and lack of value everywhere he looks.

“So, I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is fleeting and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me. So, I turned about and gave my heart to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun” (2:16–18; 2:20). “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same, as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity” (3:17; 3:19). The opaque comingling of good and evil, life and death, fortune and misfortune, beauty and gruesomeness was an experience that Qohelet struggled with.¹¹

Job, of course, is another voice troubled by the injustice and the evil he experienced. He saw that the wicked often prospered, while the righteous suffered. Like Qohelet, he loathed his life (10:2) and wished that he had never been born (chapter 3). But Job’s complaint has a sharper edge than Qohelet. The contradiction that plagues Job, his experience of being trapped in a life interwoven with life and death, good and evil, fortune and misfortune, he sees as a contradiction with God himself. Hidden behind the opaque intermixture of good and evil, God himself works and rages.¹²

“God against God,” we probably say too comfortably in our theological talk, not really comprehending what that means in our actual experience.¹³ But Job found out what it means in actual experience. Job heard God as “terror and experienced him as crushing, cruel, and sinister,” Oswald Bayer writes.¹⁴ Job protests and demands a hearing. He refuses to resign himself to his fate.¹⁵

I have taken the time to describe the experiences of people who inhabit the dark side of the misery line for a couple of reasons. First, because it helps optimists like me (who don’t know what we don’t know) to resist the urge to lob platitudes across the misery line that hurt people more than help them. Second, the perspectives which people on this side of the misery line have, are the perspectives occupied by the voices we hear in the Psalms. It helps me to understand why so many people identify with these voices. It helps me understand where these voices are coming from and where they are going—and where they want to take me when I take the time to listen to them.

The perspective of Job and the voices in the Psalms is a perspective that Luther shared. Luther was not, of course, a simple sunny-side-up theologian. In his own reading of the Scriptures, Luther recognized Job’s troubling truth that God often treats

his people in deeply contradictory ways.¹⁶ Steven Paulson says that what makes God's treatment of his saints (Abraham in Genesis 22 or David in his laments) so difficult for faith and life is that in these texts God actually opposes his own promise.¹⁷

There are a number of examples of this pattern of contradiction, but there are two that I want to focus on today.¹⁸ The first is the most obvious: The death of God's own Son, Jesus. At Jesus's baptism, God said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." But immediately after that, similar to Old Testament Israel, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Mt 3:17–4:1). This is strange enough treatment of a son. But then, at the cross, God so deeply hides his face that his own son cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mt 27:46, quoting Ps 22:1). The prophet Isaiah sharpens the contradiction when he says about the Suffering Servant, "God was pleased to crush him" (Is 53:10).¹⁹ So, God is well pleased with his son; nevertheless, he is well pleased to crush him.²⁰

The statements both express God's will. But in Jesus, we see two other things. First, we see that God remained faithful to this son. In raising him from the dead, he

Luther recognized Job's troubling truth that God often treats his people in deeply contradictory ways.

kept his word. Just like he did what he promised to Abraham, David, and Israel.²¹ Second, we see that this Son continued to trust his Father, even when to everyone with eyes to see it looked like he was nothing but another God-forsaken man. And so, as Jesus faced his death, he entrusted himself into his Father's care. "Into

your hands I commit my spirit," Jesus prayed (Lk 23:46, quoting Ps 31:6[5]). From, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," to this act of trust. Such a contra-indicated thing to do. That movement in the heart of Jesus, a move to trust his Father in spite of all the circumstances that would seem to argue against it, is a movement that I see again and again in the Psalms.

The second example of contradiction that I want you to see is the tragic story told in Numbers 14. Israel had sent spies to check out the Canaanites. When they returned with their report (Nm 13), the people grumbled and wondered why Yhwh had brought them out of Egypt in the first place. Yhwh was ready to wipe them out and start over again with Moses (Nm 14:11–12).

But Moses interceded for the people and asked for forgiveness, and Yhwh listened to Moses. "I hereby forgive, according to your word," he said" (Nm 14:20).²² But then, Yhwh turned and said just the opposite. Over the next eighteen verses of the chapter Yhwh angrily promised that every man twenty years and older would die in the wilderness and that their children would suffer forty years because of their faithlessness. He hammered nail after nail into Israel's coffin, ending his attack

with an emphatic, “I, Yhwh, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me. In this desert they will come to a complete end, and there they will die” (Nm 14:35).

None of this feels like the forgiveness God promised. His actions contradict his word. Most scholars work to dissolve the contradiction by balancing the two words of God—pardon and punishment—in terms of God’s attributes of mercy and justice. But the outcome of most mercy/justice balancing acts is that the proclamation of God’s forgiveness as full and free grace shrinks in its scope in order to give due diligence to God’s justice. Thus, most scholars describe God’s forgiveness in this story *as partial forgiveness—not full absolution*. They assume that some (terrible) price for sin must still be paid to God. God—even when he forgives—still exacts his pound of flesh.²³

But as I think about this story, I believe that when God says that he has forgiven Israel, he really has fully forgiven them. I believe that here in the midst of wrath, God remembered mercy (cf. Hab 3:2). I believe that God doesn’t fudge his forgiveness like humans do. His word is his word, and Israel is invited to cling to it. Therefore, I believe that this event is another example of the contradiction felt so sharply by Job. God truly forgives. This is his will. But then he hides it under an experience which opposes it, as if God is tempting his people to lose faith in his word because all the evidence that they see contradicts it. Every day, even those Israelites destined to die in the wilderness, had to trust that God had forgiven them, when to all appearances he had not. They had to live by that word. This is what Moses reminds the next generation as they were preparing to enter the promised land (Dt 8:3).

I tell this story because I want you to consider the idea that our situation is analogous to the predicament of Israel in Numbers 14. In the risen Jesus, the Word made flesh, God promised us just like he promised OT Israel, “I have forgiven you.”²⁴ Jesus’s resurrection is what God’s forgiveness looks like for his son, Israel. God’s forgiveness is life—not death. Salvation—not damnation.

O God, O Lord of heav’n and earth,
Thy living finger never wrote that life should be an aimless mote,
A deathward drift from futile birth.
Thy Word meant life triumphant hurled
In splendor through Thy broken world.
Since light awoke and life began,
Thou has desired Thy life for man.

LSB 834 “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth”

Resurrection is our *telos*. Our lives are moving to this climactic moment. But in this life, we so often experience just the opposite, as if God has said that everyone of us is going to die in the wilderness. And so, in somewhat of an irony, at the graves of our loved ones, we who still wander in the wilderness, repeat the words of Moses himself from Psalm 90,

For we are fade away in your wrath,
and by your anger we are terrified.
You have put our iniquities before you,
Our secret sins in the light of your face.
Certainly, all our days dwindle in your rage;
We finish our years as a groan.
The days of our years—in them are seventy years,
Or—by strength—eighty years;
Yet their span is toil and looming disaster.
Yes, they quickly pass and we fly away.

Oswald Bayer says, “God attacks and leads into affliction [*Anfechtung*]. His hiddenness besieges us in the experience of blind and furious natural catastrophes, irredeemable injustices, innocent suffering, starvation and murder, in each and every war, and in the experience of incurable disease. ‘God’ remains in these things, mostly anonymous and almost always veiled in the ‘divine passive’ [*passivum divinum*], no lover of life, but the accuser and denier—easily confused with the devil—in contrast to his revealed will and the gospel.”²⁵

This is a hard truth of our lives from the dark side of the misery line. I am surrounded by reasons to disbelieve that God has really forgiven me. Tempted daily to lose hope that God will keep his promise and raise me from the dead. Tempted to believe that God doesn’t care and maybe doesn’t even really exist. Tempted, then, to despair of life’s meaning. I am under pressure by other accounts of truth to abandon our convictions and pursue more attractive paths. What am I supposed to do when all the questions and perplexity and uncertainty gets to be too much?

But it is here, when I am most vulnerable to these thoughts and feelings, that the psalms become my comfort and counsel. I come to them because I know that God gave them to us as companions on our journey through the wilderness, with all its temptations. I read them because they can bring me back from the dark side of the misery line, to the side where I find joy, and peace and strength. But not in the naively optimistic ways of my youth. The move to faith and praise that so many psalms have—and even the psalms that are all praise—never sound like platitudes to me, because I know that they are all spoken by people who suffer their own fiery trials. These poets are not naïve to the realities of our broken world and the awful contradictions it presents. Their hearts, no matter how grievous their laments, move to trust God’s word and wait for him, in spite of what anyone else says and in spite of the dire circumstances in which they often find themselves.

So, for me personally, I do not meditate on a psalm with the expectation of moving up a staircase to feel closer to God. Nor do I read psalms because they help me escape from this temporal world and see God more clearly. I do not expect God to step out of hiding for me, like he did for Moses or Elijah, though I know that

one day he will. I am not going to speak against people who claim to have had experiences like this in their meditations. God can step out of hiding whenever he wants. It is only to say that I have not had a burning-bush experience, and I do not meditate on the psalms with this goal in mind.

Personally, I read them with the hopes of moving along the horizontal plane closer to the other side of the misery line. In the midst of life's contradictions, they encourage me to turn my attention to the mystery of God's grace. When my desires start to go haywire, they remind me where true delight is to be found. Their way with words, their images, their emotional shifts, their unique take on life, provide a deep well for my own refreshment. These travelers along the way are always ready to restore my joy, and I read them with the expectation that they will.²⁶

Part Two

I mentioned previously that I like to think of the psalms as fellow travelers on the road God has me walking. The image, of course, makes use of the over-worked metaphor "life is a journey," the theme of more high school graduation speeches that you can shake a stick at. But the metaphor helps me remember that I always want to think of reading a psalm as more like walking with someone and having a conversation with them than it is like digging for a golden nugget of propositional truth that I can admire and then pass on to others.

The notion of reading as conversation is helpful to me because it reminds me that one of my goals when I read a psalm is to see it as an opportunity to enable my theological reflection and the imagination of my faith. I don't want to use a psalm text (or any text for that matter) to shut down theological conversation. I want the conversation to continue. I want my inner dialogue with the psalm to take any number of directions—much like what happens in a good conversation so that when I part ways, I leave challenged, refreshed—influenced. My desires shaped, my fears confronted, my hopes buoyed, my delight sharpened.

What follows are three concrete suggestions that have helped me in my devotional practice of reading. These are followed by two examples illustrating how I apply these suggestions in my own reading practice. They are conversation starters that I hope will be helpful in your own devotional life.

1. Consider the formal features of a psalm as invitations to interpret. Formal characteristics can be anything from the figurative speech, to the use of various verb forms, syntactical constructions, word choice, parallelisms on all levels, and

But it is here, when I am most vulnerable to these thoughts and feelings, that the psalms become my comfort and counsel.

so on. George Steiner says that if we are going to welcome a poem into the small granary of our feeling and understanding, much like greeting a stranger, we must extend to it “practices of courtesy.” “Practices of courtesy” is what Steiner calls “philological reception.” That is, the lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical study that enables us to accurately hear the poet.²⁷ What catches your eye? What do you notice? Like looking at a painting, it is a pleasure to spot things and wonder what they mean. Reflect on what you see. Venture an interpretation.

2. As you read, *always* ask yourself what the speaker is doing. What are his intentions? What is he trying to accomplish? Is he angry? Sad? Joyful? Is he judging? Condemning? Praising? Requesting? Pleading? How does he picture God? What changes as you read through his psalm? Pay attention, not only to the shifts in theme or content across various parts of the psalm, but also pay attention to the emotional shifts that happen across the parts.
3. Ask yourself what *you* are doing as you read. The trick is to slow down and develop the self-awareness of what is going on inside of you as you read. To put this more clearly: *Learn to read yourself as you are reading the text.* Like talking to someone else, there is always an inner conversation that you should be monitoring. Why are you interpreting the words as you are? What convictions enable one interpretation but prohibit another? Are there options that you are not considering? How are you hooking (cross-texting) this text to the rest of scripture? What background texts are you using to make sense of this one, and why? How closely are you identifying with what the speaker is saying? Or maybe you are having trouble identifying or empathizing with the speaker. Why? In other words, in addition to asking yourself how you are cross-texting the psalm to the rest of scripture, ask yourself how you are cross-texting the psalm to your own life.

Psalm 22

I will start with a little thing, a single verb. As you can see, at Psalm 22:20[19], the speaker has suddenly turned from an agonizing description of his dying to a series of desperate pleas. The pleas pile up, “You, Yhwh, do not be distant! O my strength, *hurry to my assistance! Deliver my life* from the sword! Save me from the mouth of the lion.”

As I come to the end of verse 22, the context has led me to anticipate that the speaker is going to end the string with one last plea, signaled by another imperative verb, like the other verbs in this section.

But that is not what he does. What catches my eye is that instead of using another imperative (or negative command), the poet switches to a perfect tense verb. *This is a formal feature of the text—unexpected—and I don’t immediately know what to make of it.* I have to pause and ask myself, “Is it one final desperate plea,

using the perfect tense with the force of an imperative, ‘Answer me’? Or is it a joyous exclamation of gratitude, ‘You answered me’? Or is it a sudden expression of confidence in the future, a sudden and unexpected shift in emotion from earlier in the psalm, ‘You will answer me’?” All are possible.

But as I stop to consider the right answer, the best translation, deeper questions come. Has this speaker been saved or not? Has God answered, or is the speaker still waiting? Is there unresolved pain or dramatic rescue? For a moment, I don’t know where the speaker stands. I am caught in the ambiguity as my mind goes back and forth between the various options. Another way to put this is to say that I am caught in a tension that I can’t easily escape because I don’t know whether the speaker still waits or whether his wait is over.

But you see, being caught in the tension between the possibilities—saved and not saved—experiencing that tension—is precisely the point, and it is what I would like to believe that the poet intended to happen in me with this small but crucial switch in forms. The tension in me is a real, experienced tension. The interpretive tension created by the morphology and syntax of the line, “Which is it, unresolved pain or dramatic rescue?” leaves me waiting and wanting—ironically—for the answer. Is this speaker saved or not? Has God answered or not?

For me, the pleasure of the ambiguity grows when I realize that the “Is he saved or not saved?” question, reveals a truth about my life—the actual ambiguous, paradoxical situation in which this speaker, me, and all of God’s people actually live in this present age. And that tension can’t be eased by deciding to translate this verb in one way or the other. We commonly refer to it as the tension between the now and the not yet in which we live. Have we now been saved? Yes. But in a real sense, no, not yet. Are we saved or not? Well . . . yes . . . and . . . no. We know God has saved us. And yet we plead with this voice, “Yhwh, save my life.”

This line invites me into more theological reflection by reminding me that I live in paradox and ambiguity because in the Christian conception of time, time folds in upon itself and upon us. On the one hand, God’s final word of forgiveness and salvation for the world came to us *from the future* in the person and work of Jesus. It is finished. Also, the future word we will hear from God on the last day is now given to each of us personally again and again in our baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and in the proclamation of the gospel. Now, salvation is ours. Now, the Spirit gives us his fruit. Now, God often saves us from our many temporal troubles. And yet, many times he doesn’t. Many times, he seems absent. We still suffer sin, and sickness, and pain, and heartache, and death. Still . . . still . . . we wait for all these enemies to be put under Jesus’s feet on that day when our salvation will be complete. The ambiguity in that moment of reading, opened my reflection on the nature of my own life and relationship with God. It enabled me to ponder anew the mystery of grace. The ambiguity of the line doesn’t paralyze me. It captivates me.

Something else you will notice as you pass to the next part of the psalm is that this single verb serves as sort of a pivot or hinge on which the two halves of the psalm turn, because starting with Psalm 22:23[22], the darkness so present in the first half of the psalm disappears. Suddenly, the speaker appears in an entirely different place. Almost miraculously, he has popped up on the other side of the misery line. I find him in the sanctuary, where, ironically, God's people experience the now-not yet tension most vividly—the tabernacle and temple in the OT and the church in the NT.

The speaker is alive and unharmed—more than that—triumphant! Before, God was absent and the enemy close. Now the enemy is absent, and God is close. Before, the speaker was alone, surrounded by animals. Now he is surrounded by brothers and sisters. Before, he was dead. Now he is alive. Before, he was afraid. Now he rejoices. Before, he had no future. Now the future is endless. Before, he was destitute. Now he is satisfied. It is as if the old has passed away. Old ways of talking have been replaced by new. The old questions and problems (“My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from me?”), the old metaphors, the old threats and challenges, the old cries for help (Ps 22:20) are all gone. Here the speaker talks in an entirely different way. The language is that of joyous proclamation (22:23, 25), praise (22:23, 26, 27), blessing (22:27, 28), promise (22:30–32). He speaks of God's salvation as if it surpasses all boundaries of time and space. See for yourself. What's the explanation? How would you identify with its truths? Can you? The ambiguity that I see illustrates the larger point I want to make.

Psalm 31

Psalm 31 puts me in another paradoxical situation but on a bigger scale. Many readers have noticed that the speaker's thought sequence is illogical and unordered. (The unordered thought sequence is another example of a formal characteristic of the text that starts me thinking.) If you read the psalm for yourself, you will see that the speaker exhibits extreme mood swings and fluctuating feelings.²⁸ He leaves the impression that he is simultaneously in incompatible situations. God has saved him—but then he hasn't. God has given him the victory—but then not. Is God absent for the speaker or present to him?

Why does the speaker talk this way? If I assume that he is not schizophrenic, how can I understand his self-descriptions? Well, some Christians, especially those who inhabit the bright side of the misery line in a naïve way, think that when we become Christians, doubt and fear and even guilt should become a thing of the past because a strong faith can conquer all this negative emotional baggage. If you have a strong enough faith, all else can be banished from your hearts, and if not, something is wrong.²⁹ The assumption is that faith puts us in an either-or situation. But the speaker's back and forth between his assertions that he has been saved and his pleas to be saved may be because his experience is not one of either-or but of both-and.

He lives with tension and ambiguity both inside of him and outside: the gracious God seems hidden, yet also with him and for him. He knows he is saved but yet knows he is not. He experiences fear but is at the same time confident. He is distressed and also full of joy. In heart and life, these dichotomies are not sequential, but interwoven.

How does the speaker manage to navigate the rough seas that he is sailing, and how do I learn from him as I navigate my own? Well, to answer that question, I want to share with you a story from someone who negotiated the rough seas of this psalm even as she had to negotiate the rough seas of her own life. Several years ago, I had some email correspondence with a woman to whom I will give the name Leah. One day, Leah went in to see the doctor to get some medicine for the flu. However, when she left that doctor, it was not with a bottle of medicine. It was with the diagnosis of a very aggressive type of leukemia.

Over the next months and years Leah underwent harsh chemotherapy treatments and two extremely painful bone marrow transplants. During her treatment, Leah contacted me because she had heard that I was interested in the Psalms, and she was reading them and finding comfort in them. Leah asked me all kinds of questions about what she was reading, and she also shared with me some of her thoughts on the psalms she happened to be reading at that particular time.

One day she was reading Psalm 31, and this is what she told me: “In Psalm 31, there is a wonderful verse towards the end and it sort of described my situation, ‘Blessed be the Lord, for He has made marvelous His loving kindness to me in a besieged city. As for me, I said in my alarm, “I am cut off from before your eyes,” nevertheless, you heard the voice of my supplications when I cried to you” (31:20–21 [21–22]). Leah writes, “The hospital room literally was a besieged city from which there didn’t seem to be any escape. That’s why the most beautiful word in this verse is ‘nevertheless.’ Even in the middle of my frequent anxiety and sometimes even panic in that room, Jesus stayed near to me. Whether I have a strong faith or a very, very shaky one has nothing to do with the nearness of God to me. God is near to me because in Jesus, he brought me near to himself in baptism and stays near to me, even in small hospital rooms. Jesus is God’s lovingkindness made marvelous to me.”

Leah interpreted the “besieged city” in the psalm as a metaphor. And as soon as she did, she began to identify deeply with those words because in them she found some language that gave a shape to her fear and anxiety. This psalm gave her a voice in that frightening room—a voice many people lose when suffering pain or grief.

But what about the line, “[Yhwh] made marvelous his lovingkindness to me?” How can this be true for one so stricken with illness? It looks like just the opposite. “The hand of God squeezed the life out of me,” would seem a more apt description. But not to the voice in Psalm 31, and not to Leah. She sees in that enormous, little word “lovingkindness” a reference to Jesus, and that’s the word she clings to. She

This psalm gave her a voice in that frightening room—a voice many people lose when suffering pain or grief.

sees her life, not as one in which she has drawn near to God, but a life in which, through her baptism, God has drawn near to her. And with that thought comes the revelation, “Jesus is God’s lovingkindness made marvelous to me.” A bright truth shines for Leah in the darkest of places.

And so, even though with the psalmist she could think in her haste,

“I am cut off from before your eyes,” *Nevertheless*, she was certain that God had by no means abandoned her . . . *Nevertheless*. None of this is spoken out of naivete or refusal to face the darkness she experienced. Both the psalmist and Leah know the score. The cards are stacked against them . . . *Nevertheless* . . . they don’t give up on what God has promised. I am humbled by such conviction and awed by the beauty of their faith. The psalmist ends with what I am now ready to accept as a wonderful encouragement, “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for Yhwh.” And now I know, a little more clearly, how I am to wait, how I am to walk, and how I am to live.

Endnotes

- 1 All page references in the text are based on *William James: Writings 1902–1910* (New York: Literary Classics of America, 1987).
- 2 Oswald Bayer, “God’s Hiddenness,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (2014): 274, describes the *contradiction* as, “[Evil’s] opaque intermixture with good, that is, its ambiguousness and uncertainty . . . Beauty and gruesomeness are for us in nature and history inextricably intertwined with one another.” And no one can see through this.
- 3 Martin Luther in M. Michelet, *The Life of Luther: Written by Himself* Trans. William Hazlitt. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1898), 342. [Original in *Tischreden* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1912), 491.] One of the people James pegs on the dark side of the misery line, as he looked back on his life, said on one occasion, “there is nothing, *in tota vita*, which gives me any pleasure: I am utterly weary of life. I pray the Lord will come forthwith and carry me hence.”
- 4 Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher: A Journey Through Western Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1997), 228–229, remarks that a poem by Philip Larkin, another inhabitant of the dark side of the fear threshold, expresses for him the form of the fear he experienced during this period of his life:

Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realization of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood. (Verse 4, lines 4–10 of “Aubade”)
- 5 Magee, *Confessions*, 229–230.

- 6 Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1987), 26.
- 7 Ibid., 52, also see it as an experienced contradiction.
- 8 Ibid., 30.
- 9 Ibid., 33; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 202, observes that when someone complains that his or her life is meaningless, as do some people who attempt or commit suicide, they are often complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point or movement to a climax or a *telos*. Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures of their lives seems to have been lost; Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 10, says much the same thing, “To say that there is nothing beyond this world that we see, to make death the final authority of our lives, is to sow a seed of meaninglessness into that very insight.”
- 10 <https://genius.com/Tears-for-fears-mad-world-lyrics>.
- 11 Bayer, “God’s Hiddenness,” 274, uses these words to describe God’s hiddenness.
- 12 Ibid., 273.
- 13 Ibid., 274.
- 14 Ibid., 273.
- 15 For example, “I have sinned! What have I done against you, O watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your target, so that I have become a burden to you? And why do you not forgive my transgression, and take away my iniquity? Yes, now I am about to lie down in the dust, and you will look for me, but I will not be” (Job 7:20–21). “I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare; he pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior” (Job 16:12–14; ESV).
- 16 Bayer, “God’s Hiddenness,” 274.
- 17 Steven P. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God: Volume 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), xxix; Luther saw that God often reveals himself under the form of opposites, *sub contrario*. For example, in his commentary on Genesis 22, the story of the Binding of Isaac, Luther says that here God clearly contradicts himself. Luther asks, “for how do the statements agree: ‘Through Isaac shall your descendants be named’ (Gn 21:12) and ‘Take your son, and sacrifice him’”? Luther’s answer is that they do not agree. Yhwh told Abraham that he would establish his covenant through Isaac (Gn 17–19); nevertheless, he also told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The statements cannot be reconciled; nevertheless, they both express God’s will (*LW* 4:92). In other words, nothing in the text suggests that Yhwh was making a fake request and didn’t really mean it. The incomprehensible truth is that he really did mean it. He really was serious.
- 18 Like God promising a seed to Abram and then closing Sarai’s womb, or God promising David that he would establish his throne forever (2 Sm 7:13), but then exiling his kingdom to Babylon, where the promised kingdom was a valley of dry bones.
- 19 וַיִּהְיֶה הַיָּמִים הַהֵם
- 20 Bayer, “God’s Hiddenness,” 272, describes another contradiction in the death of Jesus when he writes, “That the crucified powerless one is identical with the ‘Lord of glory’ (1 Cor 2:8), with God the Almighty, is hidden to natural man, that is, the man of flesh and blood. It is literally *paradox*. It contradicts every common opinion about what ‘God’ and ‘human’ can mean.” Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 29, writes, “And the offense is not only that God died, it is that the cross is a contradiction for God. God does not correspond to himself when Christ is cursed upon the tree. He is not identical with himself; he is not united so that attributes can be attributed to him in proper, simple form.
- 21 Paul says that Jesus, who was descended from David according to the flesh, was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:1–4). That is, Jesus’s resurrection proclaimed that God was faithful to this son, just as he was faithful to OT Israel. Every time OT Israel was rescued from “death” (e.g., the exodus from Egypt; the return from Babylonian exile),

- God was proclaiming Israel to be his son in power, according to the Spirit of holiness (cf., Ex 4:22; Ez 37:1–14).
- 22 I translate the suffixed verb “I have pardoned” (׳תִּנָּחֵם) as a performative verb, “I hereby pardon”; cf. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 488.
- 23 Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers* The New American Commentary 3B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 232–233, says, “But forgiveness based upon God’s grace and covenant love does not imply that divine retribution has been or will be dismissed fully. By God’s grace the annihilation of the rebellious nation was alleviated, but by his justice they must be recompensed for their sins. The phraseology for forgiveness here . . . ‘I have forgiven [them] according to your word,’ utilizes the normal verb for forgiving or pardoning sin or the sinner; but in context it does not carry the meaning of total absolution from sin. God forgives, but he does not forget the long history of the waywardness of his people and simply exculpate them; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 259–260, also balances pardon and punishment by softening the meaning of forgiveness. He writes, “In this unit [Nm 14:20–25] one sees that divine forgiveness does not cancel divine punishment. The punishment postponed by God in Exodus 32:34 is put off no longer. God’s mercy is seen in that he does not wipe out the Israelites immediately; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 4; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 122–223, also interprets God’s forgiveness as only partial forgiveness. He writes, “The divine pardon does not mean Israel will escape all punishment for their sin, only that they will not suffer the total annihilation they deserve; Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers* The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 820, follows this same reasoning. He writes, “The verb used in this sentence is *sālah*, a term that means ‘to pardon.’ There is a sense that this verb may be seen as the antonym to the word ‘to requite’ (*nāqāh*), the word used by Moses to describe God’s righteous judgment of the wicked in v. 18. But the forgiveness in this case is not complete. The people who have behaved so intolerably will not be put to death, but neither can things go back to the way they were on the day before the rebellion. The words of God in v. 21 are forceful and direct; as surely as he lives, as surely as his glory fills the earth, there is a sentence to be paid.”
- 24 Jesus was raised for our justification, Paul says (Rom 4:24–25).
- 25 Bayer, “God’s Hiddenness,” 273.
- 26 Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 128, indicates that many, if not most, of the individual psalms, and even the book as a whole, move us along what I have called a horizontal line. He writes, “As people enter into the language of the psalmist, the alienating distance and fear they once felt with God is gradually subverted by the psalmist’s surprising honesty and intimacy. The psalms articulate a wide range of uncensored sentiments and thinking before God, from frustration, outrage, anger, and unbelief to thankfulness, love, and adoration. *The psalms often guide the reader through a liturgy that begins with anguish and ends with newfound confidence* (italics mine).”
- 27 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 156–165.
- 28 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 275, for example, writes, “The psalm does not exhibit a logically constructed thought-sequence.”
- 29 For example, when we assume that a passage such as Psalm 46:3, “Therefore we will not fear” is a full description of the experience of people who confess that God is their refuge, rather than encouragement to each other and to our self, or an expression of our sincere intentions spoken from a faithful heart, which at the same time is all too well acquainted with fear.

Disillusionment Is a Spiritual Gift (Unless It Is Not)

Bruce M. Hartung



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What is the reader's illusion about this article? Illusion is a belief, sometimes a believable-to-someone expectation, a picture of what is or what could be. But it is not yet known whether the reader's belief or expectation is illusory or not. The question cannot yet be answered prior to reading the article. The reader's belief or expectation could be fairly positive; it could be quite

negative. Whether it (or parts of it) are an illusion, a belief contrary to actual fact, is yet to be determined. In fact, the writer's belief that this is a fairly decent article may prove to be illusory; the writer's dark fear that this article may be a total bomb may not be illusory. The future, to this particular extent, is unknown. The question can only be answered retrospectively.

J. H. C. Fritz (1932) suggests that the pastor needs to be competent in the reading of three books: the book of scripture (by which he means not only the exegetical task but rather all of the historical and systematic items that comprise our academic curriculum plus ongoing study of them throughout one's lifetime), but

Editor's note

This is revised from a paper originally presented at the 30th Annual Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, September 17, 2019. The first portions of the presentation involved visual contributions that can be seen at minute 7:08 at <https://scholar.cs.edu/theo/2019/Schedule/5/>

also the book of the self, and the book of the flock.¹ For Fritz, awareness of oneself and one's spiritual life and awareness of the lives and inner spiritual world of his flock, that is, the people of his congregation (as well, assumedly, as that of folks in the larger community) are crucial competencies. Thus, dealing with a topic such as disillusionment demands reflection on the book of the self, personal experiences of disillusionment. This first section offers my personal reflections on a period of disillusionment that is likely shared by many of the current "older" generation.

Traveling through the Sixties

Toward the end of the 1950s, the United States was an optimistic and thriving place, at least as I remember it. Dwight Eisenhower, elected president in 1952, ended the Korean conflict and ushered in "Peace and Prosperity," an election slogan of his successful re-election campaign. "I like Ike" was the theme; the country was increasingly prosperous and hopeful. That continued into the 1959 election and the 1960 inauguration of President John Kennedy. The "Age of Camelot" had begun. But Camelot was about to be destroyed.

I was in the Isolation dorm, a young seminarian at Concordia Seminary, when a classmate brought the news: President Kennedy had been shot. "This is America," I thought. "It is not possible. It cannot be true." But it was. It was 1963. The assassination seared the American psyche. Later, President Kennedy's wife, Jacqueline said: "There will be great presidents again, but there will never be another Camelot."²

But there was more ugliness yet to come: the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy were both assassinated, there was violence in the streets in connection with civil rights protests, King's murder, and the Vietnam conflict. I spent my vicarage year (1965–1966) in Chicago and was present at a civil rights demonstration where bottles and rocks were thrown at us; I was in graduate school at Northwestern University in 1968 when the protests and subsequent riots consumed the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Camelot had turned into civil strife; institutions that once seemed safe and secure were cracking and dissolving; illusions of the 1950s and early 1960s crumbled. So did many of mine.

And then there was Woodstock. On the fiftieth anniversary, August 15, 2019, a USA Today headline read, "Are the good vibes gone?"; the featured quotation was from David Greenberg, Rutgers University professor of history and journalism: "Woodstock took place during a time when the '60s were starting to sour into the more violent and fractured '60s. It kind of represented a last, best hope for some of the idealism for that generation."³ Woodstock, I submit, did not succeed, either for those who attended nor for those who were present in spirit. America was seared and illusions were exposed. My own illusions related to peace and prosperity, institutional honesty and resilience, and even of a smiling and beneficent God whose home country was the USA were shattered. It is not to be underestimated, this searing of

the American soul. But where and when were peace and love to be found, if ever?

Since the sixties have affected all of our culture, and since the aging LCMS has still a significant number of folks who lived in the sixties, knowledge of this decade (and others, of course) is

important to understand “the flock.” But it is also crucial to identify and meet our own disillusionment. If this is not done, all of our thinking about disillusionment remains an academic exercise, and the existential spiritual implications of coming to terms with our own disillusionments never can make it into being spiritual gifts. But there are challenges.

*But where and when
were peace and love to
be found, if ever?*

Suppression and Control or Entertainment to Salvage Our Disillusions

Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1932; Eric Arthur Blair (aka George Orwell) wrote *1984* in 1949. Both Orwell and Huxley write with dictatorial and oppressive governmental regimes in mind: Huxley with the rise of Hitler’s Germany and Orwell seeing a defeated Germany facing Stalin’s Russia. Both write about dystopian futures. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* Neil Postman writes:

Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are

controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.⁴

Where do we find peace and love when we are deeply scarred? We find them in illusions about life. Where can we best connect to our illusions (without knowing they are such)? Sit and be entertained or be on some kind of drug.

Speaking of television (the internet was still in its infancy at the time of his writing) Postman wrote:

Those who run television do not limit our access to information but in fact widen it. Our Ministry of Culture is Huxleyan, not Orwellian. It does everything possible to encourage us to watch continuously. But what we watch is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment. In America, we are never denied the opportunity to amuse ourselves.⁵

What Huxley teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when in short, people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.⁶

This theme becomes clearly articulated in an episode of *Star Trek: Next Generation* at Stardate 45208.2. The episode is called, simply “The Game.” The starship *Enterprise* is infected with a game that takes over in an addictive way. It supplants reason and thoughtfulness. Entertainment rules. In a real way, illusion rules. It is only when two of the show’s characters return from vacation that the addiction is challenged.

Thoughtfulness, after a struggle, returns.⁷

*Could the spiritual task
be, therefore, to discern
illusions?*

Huxley was “trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but

that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.”⁸ Illusions do that. Disillusionment is necessary. When it comes as a process of discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit, it is a spiritual gift. But in the world of entertainment there is no need for the development of illusions in and of themselves because in our being entertained most all of life is illusory, moving from one illusion to another.

There is evidence that this is not working well. “Mortality from deaths of despair fell dramatically between 1907 and 1920, rose during the 1920s, and reversed that increase during the 1930s and early 1940s. Deaths of despair then rose from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s and stabilized before skyrocketing after 2000. In 2000, there were 22.7 deaths of despair per 100,000 Americans—not that different from the 1970 rate of 21.5. By 2017, the rate had doubled to 45.8 per 100,000.”⁹ Deaths of despair include deaths from drugs, alcohol and alcohol related disease, and suicide. This is one measure.

Could the spiritual task be, therefore, to discern illusions? But if we don’t know illusions are such until we discover their true identity, then the spiritual task might also be to treat disillusionment as a spiritual gift as we thoughtfully and prayerfully discover the true realities of life. That task begins with the examination of one’s own illusions and, more critically, finding positive use for one’s disillusionment.

In the Ongoing Spiritual Journey of the Follower of Jesus

Now speaking directly to the reader: A beginning task is to identify those things, places, and people in your life, your beliefs, hopes, dreams, and expectations that have proved to be illusions. You will, therefore, understand at both intellectual and emotional levels that you have experienced disillusion. And then examine your desire to be entertained, to give up thoughtfulness and the rugged task of discernment in favor of feeling pleased. What is the state of your openness to seeing illusions in your life for what they are?

This is one place where the devotional life begins—not with the focus on the externals of the problems of others but on the discernment of the spirits in one’s own inner life and world. We are all more vulnerable if we attempt to address the illusion/disillusionment of others without first, Holy Spirit-driven, examination of our own lives.

We add to that question, though, the overall question of what it is that we seek. What do we run after, investing our energy and resources? If through entertainment we seek peace, joy, meaningfulness, acceptance, and aliveness to counter anxiety, sadness, meaninglessness, loneliness, and numbness, then it will be harder to focus on one’s internal world.

Here is an example that might have some existential relevance to seminary students: What did you envision about life and studies at Concordia Seminary? Was it of a group of Jesus-followers who would gather together, piously and studiously?

Was it of living in the married-student complex among families of well-behaved and obedient children? Was it of growing more spiritually strong as the temptations of spiritual warfare diminished? And what have you found, or did you find? Some of what you pictured is, perhaps, now understood to be an illusion. If so, you have experienced disillusionment. What we thought was true turned out not to be.

We are disillusionists when we are spiritually leading consistently with a spiritual understanding of the dynamics of the spiritual life—and that begins with our own. But we need understanding and awareness. This is a first step. This dynamic of what is illusion in what we believe (and even teach) and what needs to be moved into the filter of disillusion is quite significant. We do, after all, wish to help see and deal with the real and actual world at the foot of the cross, in the power of the empty tomb and with the power of the Holy Spirit.

John Kleinig offers an understanding or awareness of what is actually happening in our particular “coming to CSL” illusion picture:

If we heed what Luther has to say about the role of the devil in the spiritual formation of theologians, we will realize our seminaries are spiritual battle-grounds, contested places, rather than spiritual oases, places of refuge from temptation. We will also be able to help our students understand why they and their families come under such concerted attack at certain points during their course of study. We may even welcome these attacks. They show that God is truly at work with us making true theologians out of us and our students.”¹⁰

Here is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests is going on:

Innumerable times a whole Christian community is broken down because it has sprung from a wish dream. . . . But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. . . . Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight. . . . He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter.¹¹

As we experience illusions, we need to measure their effect on us (as we will need to help others do so). This should be an intensely spiritual experience. I believe it should not be done alone. Gordon Johnson puts it this way: “The spiritual journey

is not to be a solitary walk but a community pilgrimage. The isolated, self-guiding ascetic is vulnerable to spiritual imbalance. Balanced spiritual formation is cultivated in the company of like-minded comrades and sensitive confidants. We draw wisdom and comfort from one another; we encourage and are encouraged by the example of our fellow Christians. To pursue spirituality alone is folly, and ultimately it misses the point of being the body of Christ.”¹² We open ourselves up, devotionally, meditatively, interpersonally, transparently to others in the body of Christ—others who are also transparent and trustworthy—providing safer spaces where vulnerability is prized and respected, thoughtfulness and honesty supported, illusions are questioned, and Jesus is center.

This is all part of, in some spiritual direction theory, “becoming aware.”¹³ This is looking to see what is happening inside the self. This is how we attend to the spiritual life that is ours in order to attend to the spiritual life of others. As Timothy Gallagher (a noted expert on Ignatian spirituality) states: “All too often the culture that surrounds us lives ‘without,’ unaware of the divine activity ‘within.’ And we ourselves, more often than we would want, find our awareness focused ‘without,’ less aware than we would like of what is happening ‘within.’ This, again, is the first and most basic Ignatian teaching on discernment: *be aware*, seek to be sufficiently ‘within’ so that what is stirring spiritually in our hearts becomes present to our consciousness.”¹⁴ This task is done within the context of the body of Christ, the community of those who follow Jesus. There are ongoing conversations about the life of the Spirit in each person. In the community all celebrate the presence of Jesus among them fulfilling his promise.

A Summary before the End of the Article

- Illusions are common and part of the reality of all of us who are human.
- Disillusionment is also a common experience as we invest in human things that which they cannot, finally, provide. In a fallen world, humans and human creations can offer but fail to deliver, at times, that which we want them and need them to give. Thus, disillusion is part of the human experience.
- In dealing with living in the world, it is possible that even the follower-of-Jesus is infected with the Huxleyan prediction relative to solving the distress of human existence—sit back and be entertained (or participate in the entertainment) and dismiss deeper reflection, discernment and/or thinking. This fosters avoiding deeper and more vulnerable conversations in favor of what will entertain enough to get one’s mind and heart away from the more significant aspects of one’s walk accompanied by Jesus in this world.
- Pastors and church leaders are called to walk with folks in their disillusionment and, in some cases, provoke it. In order to do so, however, these pastors and

church leaders need to confront their own illusions including becoming aware where these illusions, known and unknown to them, are active. This requires active challenges of all illusive pictures about life, self, others, and institutions.

Continuing the Ongoing Spiritual Journey of the Follower of Jesus

Dan Hinz discusses disillusionment in and about the church in this way:

People are disillusioned. There is a deep desire for the church to be a holy place. A place where they can come and experience God. A place where the deep longings of the soul can be satisfied. There is a hope within us that the church should be impacting the world. Loving the unlovable. Softening hard hearts. Feeding the malnourished. Caring for the poor and vulnerable in a belief that the church should be a place absent of the world's trouble. A place of peace in a world of anxiety. Hope in a world of despair. Joy in a world of stress. Love in a world of competition. This is what we feel the church should be.¹⁵

When it is not, people become dissatisfied, disillusioned. Unless, of course, this disillusionment is actually a spiritual gift. What might the Spirit teach us about struggling in imperfect ways to follow Jesus? Perhaps just that—in empathy and understanding (awareness) at the foot of the cross, in the power of the empty tomb and with the energy of the Holy Spirit we all learn experientially and deeply (not just know it in our heads) that we all struggle and that we are joined in this struggle by others in the body of Christ, accompanied in this struggle by the very Jesus who calls us his own, and energized in this struggle by the Holy Spirit in word and sacrament and within the body of Christ. Thus, imperfection is met with understanding and disillusionment with God's love in Jesus.

The picture of the community also needs to be disciplined by disillusionment. It is an aim, a direction toward which we strive. It is not yet perfectly met. Therefore, disillusionment is expected and even necessary. But it can also be problematic.

The picture of the church as a caring place where the word is preached, and the sacraments administered and where love is shared helps draw people into the church. The picture is used constructively. But then the same picture is picked up by darker spirits as the reality sets in—this is not what you thought; this is disappointing; this is not at all what you believe church should be. That is, actually, all true. This is, though, a natural and important spiritual step, to experience the reality that is mine and others of being imperfect followers of Jesus. But the darker spirits use this disillusionment process to move people away from the church and even away from Jesus. The darker spirits are aided and abetted when members of the church become defensive and are not open to feedback, as if their picture of the church is reality. “I

believe our church is friendly, therefore it is, and if people do not experience that, it is their problem.”

The same thing can be illustrated by the use of conscience. The Holy Spirit uses conscience to convict people of their sinfulness and wrongdoing and calls people (you and me) to repentance. But as that occurs the darker spirits can use conscience to drive people away—“have you truly repented well enough; are you actually sorry enough for your sin?”

Openness to feedback and walking together with others becomes a goal of the community, always done imperfectly. Knowing this dynamic helps in our awareness and allows us to more empathically walk with others and even predict the struggle. Rather than disillusionment becoming a cause for distance, cynicism, despair, or flight into entertainment it becomes the means of people being more truly with each other and sharing each other’s sorrows and joys, realistically and imperfectly but actually.

Through the discernment process the community, and each individual in it, is called to action. Since the picture of the church community does beckon us, guided and energized by the Spirit, we are called to take action when we inevitably miss the mark, just as our growth as followers of Jesus demands that we take action on the basis of our awareness. To sit in awareness is not enough, imperfectly though our actions that emerge may be. A simple example: In discernment I discover that my actions or words have hurt another person. While I confess that, receiving absolution through Jesus, I also need to take action to repair, if possible, the hurt I brought. That requires a conversation with the other.

Openness to feedback and walking together with others becomes a goal of the community, always done imperfectly.

In the struggles with disillusionment there is one more dynamic to briefly address. It emerges as something like this: “I have been very active, and it has been very rewarding, to have time together with others as well as individually by myself to read and discuss the scriptures. But lately this has not brought me the same rewards. It all seems more distant and remote to me now. I feel guilty about this but also I think I should take a vacation from doing this—or maybe stop altogether for a while—or perhaps find an exciting new group that would bring the rewards I once experienced back.”

This is the great spiritual negative reversal—that which once beckoned a closer walk with others in scripture and offered a sense of excitement and growing now becomes a source of distance and moving away from the word. (Think here not only of entertainment questions but also darker spirits using this to create distance in the community.)

In the ongoing discernment process, what action is indicated at this point? Here is the spiritual direction principle: if doing something has been spiritually nourishing and strengthened your side of seeing Jesus as walking with you in your life, then keep doing it regardless of its lessening effects and talk about your inner-world struggles with what is happening. It is much like exercise in this regard. One may get some immediate results that can be seen, but there is likely a plateau where it does not seem as though there is much effect. Keep at it. Gather members of the body of Christ to share your struggle and to encourage you. Then, when discernment tends to completion, you might add or subtract some exercises or head off for another trainer. The idea is that awareness and discernment also bring change, but not one that is born of chasing after the wind (or entertainment or some other highpoint), but rather change born of discernment through conversation, thoughtfulness, study, and prayer. That is the development of patience and of discipline.

A Word about COVID-19

The third decade of the twenty-first century begins with a pandemic. Something hardly on the charts of the fears of the average American (“biological warfare was 20th on the list of the Chapman University Survey of American Fears in 2018, but “germs” was 80th, even lower, by 16 positions, than “Hell”¹⁶). “Virus” also known as “germs” is now a planetary-wide fear, causing heartbreak and upheaval at every turn. The Department of Health and Human Services’ public sentiment analysis suggests that the American public is not doing well and is primarily “mad and sad.”¹⁷ There is already a psychological test, the Epidemic-Pandemic Impacts Inventory (EPII) that is designed to “learn about the impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic and future epidemics on various domains of personal and family life.”¹⁸

Many speak of a desire to return to “normal.” But, perhaps, our opportunity spiritually is to discern and learn from our experience. This will require conversations about the illusions that have suffered distress and the disillusionment that has come about. This is a significant spiritual opportunity. What am I learning from this experience? How has God been active in my life and in the lives of others? In what ways has the presence of Jesus in fulfillment of his promise to be with me and us unto the end of the age been clear (or not) for me? What have I not been able to do that I miss? What have I not been able to do that I do not miss? What did I used to believe that I no longer do? (This is a version of the question about illusion.) What did I used to believe that I still do? What spiritual practices have been helpful to me?

Painful as the COVID-19 experience is, “Finally, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me [Paul]. Then the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:8–9).

Endnotes

- 1 J. H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology: A Handbook of Scriptural Principles* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), 8.
- 2 See, for instance, the larger story at <https://www.reference.com/history/were-kennedy-years-called-camelot-a7e148b2e36e05b5>
- 3 “Are the Good Vibes Gone”, *USA Today*, August 15, 2019.
- 4 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniv. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), xix–xx.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 155–156.
- 7 See episode trailer, <https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?fr=yfpt&p=star+trek+next+generation+the+game+episode#id=18&vid=d4e94d41049d155a20ac535850787cfd&action=click>
- 8 Postman, 163.
- 9 See <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/9/long-term-trends-in-deaths-of-despair>, for a more complete description of this and comparable statistics as well.
- 10 Quoted in Bruce Hartung, *Holding Up the Prophet’s Hand: Supporting Church Workers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 16. The original quotation in an extended form is in John Kleinig, “Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (July 2002): 265.
- 11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper One, 1954), 26–27. Speaking to interpersonal disappointments, Bonhoeffer writes, “The very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship” (28–29).
- 12 Gordon Johnston, “Old Testament Community and Spiritual Formation” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications), 78.
- 13 See, for instance, William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper One, 1982). This is a classic book in the Ignatian tradition.
- 14 Timothy Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2012), 18.
- 15 See the Dan Hinz website, <https://www.danhinz.org/>
- 16 <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/americas-top-fears-2018/>
- 17 Eileen Sullivan and Michael Shear, “Americans are Feeling Mad and Sad, a Study Finds,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2020.
- 18 https://www.phenxtoolkit.org/toolkit_content/PDF/Grasso_EPII.pdf

*Homiletical
Helps*

Anatomy of a Sermon

A Sermon on Ruth 1 by Jeffrey Gibbs

David R. Schmitt

Author's note: Jeffrey Gibbs preached this sermon at the chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on October 26, 1998. Audio of the original sermon can be heard at <https://scholar.csl.edu/cs9899/35/>. The sermon is represented in italic type below which can be read all at once by following the gray bars.

On the seminary campus and in the church at large, Dr. Gibbs is known for his scholarly work on the gospel of Matthew and for his timely resurrection of the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for our life and thought. As we give thanks for his years of service at the seminary, it would be natural to study a sermon where Dr. Gibbs was preaching from Matthew or unfolding the importance of the resurrection of Jesus. I have, however, chosen, to meditate upon a sermon Dr. Gibbs preached from the book of Ruth.

I do this not simply because I want to break down our tendency to categorize preachers but because I want to build up our recognition of qualities in Jeff's preaching that are both enduring, whether he is preaching on Matthew or Ruth, and uplifting, helping fellow preachers navigate more faithfully and fruitfully the art of preaching.

So, let's listen in as Dr. Gibbs preaches on the opening of the book of Ruth.

"What is going ON here? What do you think you are DOING?" Words of fear, of anger, of discouragement, perhaps of despair. Words spoken by someone whose life seems unfair, out of their control, and filled with pain. Words at times spoken to God, spoken at God. Words that could very well have been . . . Naomi's words.

All preachers face the question of how to lead hearers into the Scriptures. Some begin with the text. That is, they quote a verse from Scripture and then turn to explanation. This method makes sense when your hearers are accustomed to hearing sermons and are familiar with reading the Scriptures. Since they want to hear the Scriptures and have them explained, you start with the Scriptures and then move into explanation.

But those are not the only kind of people who listen to sermons and certainly not the only kind of hearers that preachers want to reach. Even though Jeff is preaching to people who are familiar with the Scriptures, he models for us a pastoral way of leading other kinds of hearers to listen to the word of God.

Sometimes, we preach to people who are not biblically literate. For them, the

Scriptures are foreign territory. When preaching to such people, if a preacher begins by quoting a text, the hearers are put at a disadvantage. The preacher has started with something the hearers don't know or understand. For others, the Scriptures are not just foreign territory, they are a hostile one as well. Having frequently heard the Scriptures misused and misquoted, they have fundamental misunderstandings of the faith. Or, worse yet, having had proof texts from Scripture thrown at them in hostile arguments, when a preacher quotes a text, their first instinct is to duck. How do you reach such people in preaching? Jeff's sermon offers a way.

Notice how Jeff starts with human experience and then leads his hearers from that experience into the text. The human experience is one of suffering. A person is filled with fear, anger, pain. Not only does Jeff tap into this human experience, but he puts this experience into dialog. He asks us to listen and hear how suffering people speak. Consider the power of that moment. If you have ever said these words at some point in your life or if you have ever overheard somebody say these words, you recognize that the preacher is being honest. He is speaking truly about human experience. Only at the very end of this moment, after you can remember times in which you have heard or even said these words, does Jeff then lead us into the Scriptures.

I call this technique “backing into a text.” Rather than start with the text and explain it for the hearers, the preacher starts with the hearers, naming something true to their experience, and then helps them discover how God addresses this very real human experience in the text. While not every sermon needs to begin this way, it is a good technique to gain a hearing from those who might feel distanced from the Scriptures.

This is the view from within, the inside view of Naomi's life and existence, the inside view in the appointed text from the book of Ruth, chapter one. I don't think I had ever really begun to appreciate what Naomi's point of view might have been until I was preparing for this chapel service. True, we don't explicitly have the words I have suggested. But we do have these words from Naomi's mouth—“The hand of Yahweh has gone forth against me.” And in the verses immediately following, we hear her voice again—“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but Yahweh has brought me back empty.” The name “Naomi” is related to the Hebrew word for “pleasant.” The name “Mara” means . . . bitter.

What do you think you're doing? Naomi and her husband leave the land of Israel, and they go with their two sons to dwell in the field of Moab . . . with the idolaters. While they are there, her husband dies, and as the text poignantly declares, “she was left.” Then the widow's two sons marry . . . two idolaters. And then the sons die. Widowed, bereft of her offspring, with two Moabite daughters-in-law. Yes, there is a wonderful love between Naomi on the one hand and Orpah and Ruth on the other. Yes, there is a moving scene toward the end of this text: “Where you go, I will go . . . your people/my people . . . your

god/my god.” But that leaves us with questions. A deep love between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a wonderful thing, but isn’t that a strange reason to switch religions?

The inside view of this text is not a pretty picture. Naomi does not know what is going on, she can see that her life is difficult and filled with sadness and loss.

One challenge for Christians is that we tend to read Scripture too quickly. Think about it. Our culture inundates us with words. In order to survive, we learn to skim emails, to glance at newsfeeds, and to process information rapidly. We learn to read quickly. Unfortunately, sometimes we bring this way of reading to the Scriptures and we fail to pause and ponder, to truly meditate on the experience of the text.

When God’s people gather for worship, this can be a problem. Short sections of Scripture are read, responses are said, and the service moves on. The sermon, however, is a time to help people slow down and enter into meditation on the texts of Scripture.

This is one of the beautiful qualities of Jeff’s preaching that I have enjoyed over the years. He likes to pause and meditate on the experience of a text. While some of what he does can be conveyed on the printed page, much of it is only experienced by hearing him preach.

Have you ever been drawn into what someone is saying, not because you are particularly interested in the topic, but because they are so completely and fully engaged? For beginning preachers, this kind of engagement often happens as they tell personal stories. They speak about an experience of childhood and, as they remember, they speak from the heart. For experienced preachers, a subtle shift happens. They speak with honesty and emotional engagement, but they are not telling personal stories. No, they are talking about the word and the work of God. Jeff’s preaching has always had that quality for me. He does not speak dramatically to gain my attention. No, he speaks softly, deliberately, and with measured pacing. Yet, he has my attention because I can tell that he cares deeply about what he says. And because he cares, I do too.

While the manner of his preaching is not something we can see in print, the method of his preaching is. Notice how Jeff takes time to unfold the text. He leads us in the process of reading slowly and meditating. Jeff begins and ends with a statement of his main idea (“the inside view”). In between, however, Jeff asks us to live with this idea, to experience it. He does not state his point and then hurriedly move on to something else. No, instead, he develops his point by moving into the text and meditating upon its intricacies. With his main idea clearly stated, Jeff takes time to offer small fragments of the text and glimpses of human experience that have a cumulative effect. Because of this slow and intentional development, “the inside view” is not something we stand apart from and think about. No, it is something we enter into and experience.

The text ends there, and that is the inside view. And it's an inside view with which we can identify—either by personal experience or through the lens of someone we know and love. And even though the story has a sort of happy ending: Boaz comes to play the part of kinsman redeemer, Ruth marries Boaz, and so it goes—even so, still—Elimilech, Naomi's husband, still died. And Mahlon and Chilion, her sons, they died. The inside view doesn't yield a story where God makes it all better. It doesn't always make sense, when you view your life from the inside.

Your life might be like that . . . or the life of someone you love might be like that. It doesn't always make sense. You can't always tell what is going on. The story doesn't always have a happy ending. Because sin really is sin. And sickness really is sickness. And death really is death and we don't know why a loving and almighty God allows such things to continue! The view from inside—you can't ignore it or pretend that it's not there or pretend that it is not real. If you would be a pastor, a shepherd of God's people and one who cares for souls, you have to be willing to be with people when all they can see is the view from inside. The perspective of Naomi. And you can't judge it and you can't deny it, and sometimes you can't explain the view from inside.

At this point, Jeff moves from text to application and we can begin to see why he has spent so much time developing Naomi's experience. In a culture of the prosperity gospel and therapeutic spirituality, Christianity can be misunderstood. God can be used to erase any compassionate consideration of human suffering. Rather than listen as others lament, Christians can be quick to offer the promise of a happy ending. While what they say is true, it is not always timely. For this reason, Jeff takes time to listen to Naomi, and by listening to her, to open our hearts to listening to those who suffer. Using a series of short sentences, parallel in form, Jeff drives the point home. "Sin really is sin. And sickness really is sickness. And death really is death." Rather than rush to a happy ending, Jeff equips us to sit and listen in the midst of suffering, confessing its stark reality.

Notice also how Jeff differentiates among his hearers when he forms his application. Sometimes, when preachers apply the text, they try to force their hearers into a unified experience. For example, they might say, "we all suffer like this." Such application can be artificial. The preacher is overgeneralizing and not recognizing the diversity of people whom God has gathered before him. As Jeff moves into application, he remains aware that not everyone is in the same place. He uses a technique I call creating "rhetorical spaces." He develops various life situations with which his hearers could identify. They could be people who suffer or they could be those who are called to care for others who are involved in suffering. Not everyone needs to have the exact same experience at this moment in the sermon. Rhetorical spaces are a powerful tool for preachers. They help preachers acknowledge the

diversity that is present among their hearers and create the distance and distinctions that are needed for hearers to discern God's word addressing them.

But it's not the only view. Not in this text, and not in our lives and the lives of those we love. It is NOT the only view. These events, the story of Naomi is being told by someone after the fact. His voice is directing us as we read, as we hear. He knows more than Naomi may realize. His is the view from outside. It's not simplistic, and it doesn't guarantee a happy ending. But listen to what he tells us. Listen, so that when those who suffer come to the place where they have ears to hear, you can tell it to them.

"Now it came about in the days when the judges were judging." Judges—a time of chaos and disorder in Israel, looking back on it, a time when even the divinely appointed deliverers of God's people were confused and double-minded and inadequate. But it would not always be so—there's a view from outside. "A certain man from Bethlehem went to sojourn in the land of Moab." Not enough to say it once, let's say it again. "They were Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah." Why bother saying the town? Not once, but twice? No real reason . . . yet . . . and no reason of which Naomi could be aware. But Naomi, in the verses at the end of the chapter, returns with Ruth from the land of Moab, and she returns to . . . Bethlehem.

And there the story plays out and you know how it goes and we could dwell on the inside view. But let's stay with the outside perspective, the very outer frame of this little book of Ruth. Because the power doesn't come from the inside view, even when it's a happy one. The power and the strength come from the very end, the very end of this little book. At the very end, Boaz and Ruth have a son, and they name him Obed. He is the father of Jesse. And Jesse is the father of David. David of Bethlehem. But it's not enough for the narrative to say it once. Let's say it again and give a little genealogy just so we can offer again that outside view. The final verse of the book of Ruth: "and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse was born David." David the king. David, to whom God would give a promise and through whose line God would be at work in Israel. Even as the Old Testament story plays out and according to the inside view there is sin and rebellion and idolatry as Israel and her kings fall away from their God and death and judgment come upon them—even then God is at work in Israel.

That's the outside view. God is at work. Not nearly always to rub away the effects of sickness and death. No, the inside view may very well be a harsh one, a sad one, a heart-breaking one. But it's not the only view and that's the point. God was at work . . . for Naomi. For the God of Israel is Yahweh, the covenant God, whose name is really understood only when he comes down to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. Yahweh was Israel's God during the period of the Judges, when each man did what was right in his own eyes and your run-of-

the-mill almighty god would have just written these people off. But no, God was at work in Israel, and he would give them a shepherd king who, sinner though he was, did not lead them into idolatry—David led them to the worship of the only God whose mercy is for a lifetime . . . even for a lifetime filled with sadness. God is at work. He has a plan, and he is carrying it out all around Naomi as the plan leads to David.

Good preaching teaches the faith. At the heart of a sermon is a faithful teaching that the preacher seeks to develop for his hearers.

In his sermon, Jeff communicates a complex paradox of the Christian life. The paradox is that, as Christians, we experience both suffering (the inside view) and the gracious work of God (the outside view) at the same time.

Teaching paradoxical truths is like walking a tightrope. You can easily fall off on either side. For example, with this particular paradox, there are some who use the outside view (the work of God to overcome suffering) to erase the inside view (the experience of suffering in daily life) and there are others who use the inside view (the suffering of daily life) to erase the outside view (that God is able to work in the midst of suffering). Jeff, however, preaches this teaching as a paradoxical tension. We live in both the inside and the outside view at the same time. We don't deny the reality of suffering because of God's work and we don't deny God's work because of the reality of suffering. Instead, we hold on to the reality of suffering and the reality of God's work at the same time.

To aid his hearers in maintaining this paradoxical tension, Jeff uses simple language and a clear structure. Through simple language ("the inside view" and "the outside view"), the sermon offers the hearers a clear contrast. Through an explicit transitional statement ("But it's not the only view"), the sermon has a clear structure. Jeff will use the logic of contrast to move from one side of the paradox (the inside view) to the other (the outside view).

While the flow of the sermon from one point to another is simple, the development of these points is complex. In the first part of the sermon, Jeff asked us to listen to the voice of Naomi. Considering her perspective, we heard and acknowledged the reality of the inside view. Now, the sermon turns and explores the second part of this tension as Jeff considers the voice of the narrator. Through the voice of the narrator we hear the outside view, namely that "God is at work." By approaching the text through the character of Naomi and the narrator and by offering clear and simple statements, repeated for emphasis, Jeff sets up the paradoxical contrast of the inside view and the outside view, of living in the midst of suffering while God is at work.

God was at work in David . . . but his work was far from finished. The promise continued to echo through the years as the fortunes of Israel waxed and

mostly waned and sadness and destruction and exile and punishment for sin gave an inside view that broke the heart of the prophets and broke the back of the nation. But God was at work. God's promise of a faithful shepherd king to rule over God's people cannot be taken away because it's the outside view, it's God's view and God is at work in Israel and the promise comes true . . . in the city of David. In Bethlehem Ephrathah, in the land of Judah, in the days of Herod the king, when wise men came from the East. God is at work in the one acclaimed as the Son of David. In Jesus.

Jesus is God's bigger picture. God's outside view, and in him God was at work—in the Shepherd King, the good shepherd. He went about doing good and healing many, for God was with him. And when he dealt with the brokenness and the sin and pain he did not take it all away—though there are days and weeks when we wonder why and we cry out. He did not take it away. He will, one day—one day, but not yet. No, he took the sin and evil upon himself. He entered it—for us, in our place. So he understands and he can comfort us in our distress. But more—the ultimate power of sin and death and sickness—their ultimate power is gone. Because of Jesus we will not be condemned, and because of Jesus, God will always be our faithful and loving Father—God.

Preaching is centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ for forgiveness, life, and salvation. The question, however, is how does one move from the text to Christ? This question is an important one because it prevents preachers from making awkward insertions of stereotypical and formulaic statements in order to preach Christ in the sermon. Preachers want the gospel proclamation to flow naturally from the text rather than be artificially imposed upon it.

Here, Jeff lets the textual reference to David lead him to the proclamation of Christ. First, notice how Jeff picks up on the genealogical references of the text. These references encourage Jeff to fill in the gaps for his hearers. He offers an insight into the much larger history of Israel's promising God. His unfolding of the history of God's promises to Israel makes sense to the hearers because it fits with what has already been offered by the text.

Second, Jeff chooses to work with typology. Development of David (the type) leads to the even greater development and proclamation of Jesus (the antitype). Textual references to the city of Bethlehem and historical references to how David led people to "worship the only God whose mercy is for a lifetime" take on deeper meaning when seen in light of Christ. When working with typology to move from the text to Christ, the preacher wants to use details like the ones that Jeff has chosen to create parallels that resonate. An earlier description of the type prepares people for a later proclamation of the antitype. Such intentional parallelism helps the sermon feel coherent and unified, as all of the details suddenly make sense and lead us to Christ.

Nothing can separate us—Paul’s outside view. Oh, Paul knew the inside view, just read the book of Acts! But even when the inside view is tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword, the outside view is this—neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor things present nor things to come, nor power, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord [Rom 8].

This is truly faith. Not superficial faith or pretend faith, and certainly not blind faith—but faith that can see two views at the same time. Oh Christians! When the inside view is fearful and strong, may your God give you hearts that are stronger still, to hold fast to what is always true: Jesus Christ for you, and no suffering can take that away. Oh pastors of Christ’s flock which he purchased with his own blood! God give to you, as pastors, wise and loving hearts to draw near to God’s suffering children, to hear the cry of the heart trapped in despair . . . and with patient, loving wisdom to say and show the promise that no matter what may come. God in Christ is still at work on their behalf. Amen.

Preaching a paradox, centered in Christ, is difficult. Even more difficult, however, is maintaining that paradox in daily life. Jeff closes his sermon by seeking to cultivate a way of faithful living among Christ’s disciples.

The paradox this sermon unfolds will not be resolved in this lifetime. Since that is the case, Jeff desires that it will be faithfully confessed and fervently lived throughout our lifetime. Christians are called to hold on to the tension of this paradox as they follow Christ.

To do that, Jeff offers a well-known text of Scripture to the hearers and yet he does it with the paradox in mind. Notice how Jeff considers these familiar words of Paul through the lens of this paradox. We live in the inside view (there will be suffering, death, persecution) and the outside view (trusting in the work of God that delivers us from sin, death, and the devil) at the same time.

By using the paradox as a lens through which to read a familiar text, Jeff cultivates a way of reading the Scriptures. One is invited to run throughout Scripture, considering different texts, different events, and different people and to see this paradox of living in the inside view and the outside view at the same time. Seeing God at work this way throughout the Scriptures, one is prepared to see God at work this way in life. Whether one is suffering or ministering to those who are suffering, one does so aware of and committed to hearing and confessing both the inside and the outside view.

In this sermon, Jeff has captured the beauty of careful exegesis in preaching. It is not just there to help us interpret the Scriptures. It is there to help us interpret life. Why? Because reading the Scriptures carefully and closely forms how we live as Christians. For that reason, this small chapel sermon on Ruth is a fitting way to remember Jeff and the work that God has done through him for so many years.

Reviews

MAKING CHRISTIAN COUNSELING MORE CHRIST CENTERED. By Rick W. Marrs. Westbow Press, 2019. 240 pages. Paper. \$14.95.

“A young pastor once asked author and noted Lutheran pastor/professor Harold Senkbeil what questions he asks Christian counselors when he is considering them as a referral source for parishioners. Dr. Senkbeil responded, ‘I ask them how they handle suffering’” (56). With years of experience as a psychologist, pastor, professor, and administrator at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Marrs provides a clear explanation of Luther’s theology and how it can be utilized by soul care providers for the benefit of those they work with. The result is a valuable resource for pastors and Christian counselors who desire to bring a higher level of theological sophistication to their Christian counseling and soul care from a Lutheran perspective.

Written for Lutherans and non-Lutherans, this book serves both pastors who want to see how Lutheran theology can directly impact their pastoral care and the Christian counselors they refer people to. “Luther’s theological approach, with his emphasis on our need for daily Gospel, is not just important for all Lutherans, but it is important for all Christendom to know” (xv). Lutheran pastors will appreciate Marrs’s explanation of how Luther’s theology can be used with parishioners struggling with the many forms of what Luther referred to as “Anfechtung” (tribulation).



For Christian counselors, a better understanding of Luther’s theology and examples of application within sessions will help counselees and increase the level of trust Lutheran pastors have when referring parishioners. Marrs’s ability to be “bilingual” in both psychology and Lutheran theology made it possible to create a balanced and thoughtful addition to Christian psychology literature.

In three sections, the book provides an introduction, explanation of Luther’s core theological concepts that apply to soul care, and ways to implement these theological concepts within a counseling session. In the first section, Marrs suggests Luther’s theology and emphasis on the gospel is integral to genuinely Christian soul care. While the law has an important role to play in Christian life, it tends to be unintentionally overemphasized in counseling. However,

“the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8–9) is the foundation for what we do in soul care work” (11). This may be the primary reason why Luther’s theology needs to be retrieved in today’s society and throughout Christendom.

The second section addresses Luther’s theology in regards to soul care, his practices as soul caregiver, and how his writings influenced others. Marrs provides succinct yet comprehensive summaries of Luther’s teachings in regards to struggles with *Anfechtung*, the theology of the cross, God’s presence in suffering as his “alien work,” some paradoxes of the Christian faith relevant to soul care—especially *simul justus et peccator*, and his distinction between law and gospel. Marrs also provides examples of Luther’s soul care to others, describing his emphasis on compassion and comfort provided to those suffering through the assurance of God’s mercy and forgiveness in Christ.

The final section contains examples and techniques for use in counseling sessions by pastors and Christian counselors, including ways to bring in the gospel during sessions, when the law should be presented, gospel/law metaphors, how the theology of the cross applies to particular mental disorders, and a balanced discussion of Christian meditation. Marrs also draws attention to the importance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in soul care, and the therapeutic role they can play in the life of a counselee. The book concludes with the importance of community among the body of Christ,

and how to encourage counselees to participate in communion with others. Two appendices include quotes from C. F. W. Walther about soul care and additional teaching about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, along with their implications for soul care.

In our evaluation of this book, the reviewers (one Lutheran, one non-Lutheran) are quite enthusiastic, because it exemplifies well a Lutheran version of our approach to psychology and counseling, called “Christian psychology.”¹ Such a book is especially valuable in our day when New Testament scholars like N. T. Wright, James Dunn, and others have critiqued Luther’s understanding of justification (and that of historic Protestantism in general) as a departure from the Apostle Paul’s teaching, arguing that it was shaped more by Luther’s tortured soul, while serving as a monk, than the New Testament. However, Luther’s troubled spiritual journey may have actually prepared him to “(re)discover” (as Marrs puts it) in the Apostle Paul’s writings what many others had missed for so long. These treasures of the Christian gospel provide a transcendent basis for Christian therapy, which has no parallel in secular therapy. The gospel directs the attention of Christians externally to God’s word, which makes it easier for believers to grow in self-awareness without fear of their sin, knowing by faith there is no condemnation in Christ.

Luther’s sharp distinction between law and gospel, and his corollary recognition that Christianity promotes

two kinds of righteousness provide additional “tools” or “perspectives” that can help Christians separate conceptually their old self and its practices from their new self in Christ and its practices. We could say that the thrust of Marrs’s book is to show how psychotherapy and counseling centered on Christ helps believers receive and accept God’s word to them and about them in Christ.

Many secular psychologists would be surprised to learn that Luther’s contrast between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross anticipates psychodynamic thought by suggesting that the way some Christians pursue glory shows they can be self-deceived about their own motives and have a profound misunderstanding of God’s (hidden) purposes. When the theology of the cross is combined with Luther’s recognition of the value of *Anfechtung* for promoting Christian maturity and the honesty and transparency promoted by the doctrine of *simul justus et peccator*, we find a theologically based therapeutic framework geared to undermine perfectionism by promoting acceptance of oneself as righteous in Christ while knowing one is still inclined to sin and times of suffering. Christian therapy can utilize such teachings to help counselees become better able to face the challenges of life and better inoculated against the disappointments that overly sanguine approaches to the Christian life would engender.

If we have a concern about the book, it would be that its emphasis on

objectivism in the Christian life—in keeping with much of Lutheranism—may be correlated to what seems like its primarily cognitive approach to Christian psychotherapy and counseling. That, in turn, may have prevented Marrs from focusing on those aspects of Luther’s thought which may have contributed to a more psychodynamic and experiential approach to Christian therapy. However we do not wish to criticize a book for which we are so thankful, given its kindly and sensitive articulation of the distinctive therapeutic benefits to be found in the Lutheran expression of Christianity. It joins a growing list of distinctly Christian models of therapy which someday will challenge the massive hegemony currently enjoyed by secular therapy.

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- 1 See, for example, Robert C. Roberts and Paul J. Watson, “A Christian Psychology View” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 149–178.

HOW CHANGE COMES TO YOUR CHURCH: A Guidebook for Church Innovations. *By Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. Eerdmans, 2019. Paper. 154 pages. \$16.99.*

Keifert, a retired professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, and Granberg-Michaelson, retired

general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, outline in this volume the process used by the organization founded over three decades ago by Keifert, Church Innovations, Institute, to aid congregations and denominational judicatories trying to cope with change in moving from where they have been into “God’s preferred and promised future” for their part of Christ’s body. The authors do not spurn either qualitative or quantitative social-scientific research in that process, but their approach’s focus and foundation lies in the practice of “dwelling in the Word.” They have used this process in the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and other lands, to point congregations and larger administrative units of the church in the direction of this God-given “preferred and promised future.” Their experience has confirmed that one size does not fit all and that God is sending his people in a variety of ways into the countless situations of the societies in which his people live today. Each new charting of what is to come may share many characteristics with others, but each is unique.

This process proceeds from the presupposition that faithful changes are made when Christians share a clear sense of purpose, (1) recognizing that God wants them as a community to be giving witness to those outside the faith and serving the needs of all within their reach; (2) then seeking space for creative change outside the normal “business-as-usual” structures; (3) using spiritual discernment rather than

“strategic planning and parliamentary-style practices” that make decisions by a majority of one if need be; (4) engaging the biblical story, letting the text of Scripture govern them rather than vice versa; and (5) finding faithful change through dialogue and partnership with those in the body of Christ outside their own circle (22–24).

Key to this adventure is the recognition that God wants all to come to a knowledge of the truth and that the Holy Spirit is letting his kingdom come through those who trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior. For the authors, change or innovation starts in failure, grows out of Christian imagination, and leads to a shared positive outcome (33). The book’s emphasis on cultivating spiritual discernment does not ignore the need for sober analysis, sometimes with secular tools, when congregations find themselves stuck in neutral or reverse, but discernment arises from dwelling in God’s word with an eye toward what God has equipped this particular group of God’s people to do with his gifts of talents and opportunities. Luther’s understanding of meditation, along with prayer in the midst of spiritual assaults, lurks behind the prescription that Bible study not whisk through as many verses per meeting as possible. Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson want Christians to dwell on specific passages (not verses but pericopes) for as long as it takes to let the Holy Spirit permeate the thinking of participants and cultivate their wisdom for bringing God’s rule through them to those whose lives they can touch. They

cite studies that show that “dwelling in the same Scripture for a full year increases the capacity of the local church to enter the holding environment necessary for Christian innovation” (82).

Grounded in such study of Scripture, believers should “find a reasonably friendly-looking stranger” in order to “listen one another into free speech” (create sufficient trust to speak honestly about perceptions of the Christian faith and personal or community needs) and then move to “reporting what you heard, not what you said.” This results in providing the basis for discernment of the challenges that the Holy Spirit is offering to shape his “preferred and promised future” for the congregation, district/diocese, or church body (86–95).

This review cannot detail how the authors describe what happens as this discerning exploration of God’s will for a group takes shape. Anyone using the volume will find it a preparation for, not a completion of, the task of finding the way from congregational stagnation or loss, at every level, including spiritual, into what God wants us to be doing with the message of Christ as members support each other in living out God’s word under Christ’s cross. The authors supply provocation, encouragement, and some suggestions for getting the meaningful, biblically faithful change rolling. They invite readers to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide this rolling into the service of God’s kingdom that comes indeed without our prayer, but, according to his plan—comes among

and through us when he strengthens us and holds us firm in his word and faith.

Robert Kolb

COME IN, WE ARE CLOSED. *By Tyrel Bramwell. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018. Paper. 149 pages. \$9.99.*

This fictional narrative gently works through the basic idea of closed communion. Once the book explains what closed communion means, it proceeds to examine all of the concerns and charges levied against the practice in light of Scripture. The book aims to present closed communion as the truest and most beneficial form of communion and it hits the mark admirably.

“Is communion even that big a deal? Aren’t individual Christians able to determine for themselves whether they should be taking communion or not? Isn’t it unloving and hurtful to turn someone away from communion?” These questions and more are fielded by the book as it walks step-by-step through all of the controversies of the sacrament. The book contrasts open communion practices with closed communion to show how open communion is detrimental and hurts the communicant and the church. Each question is addressed after the theological foundation has been laid to come to a scriptural conclusion.

The book is written with both the layperson and the pastor in mind. It starts at a basic level and works through the material a piece at a time. It doesn’t

use heavy theological jargon and is always easy to follow. Though it deals with some difficult material, its presentation still allows it to be a quick read.

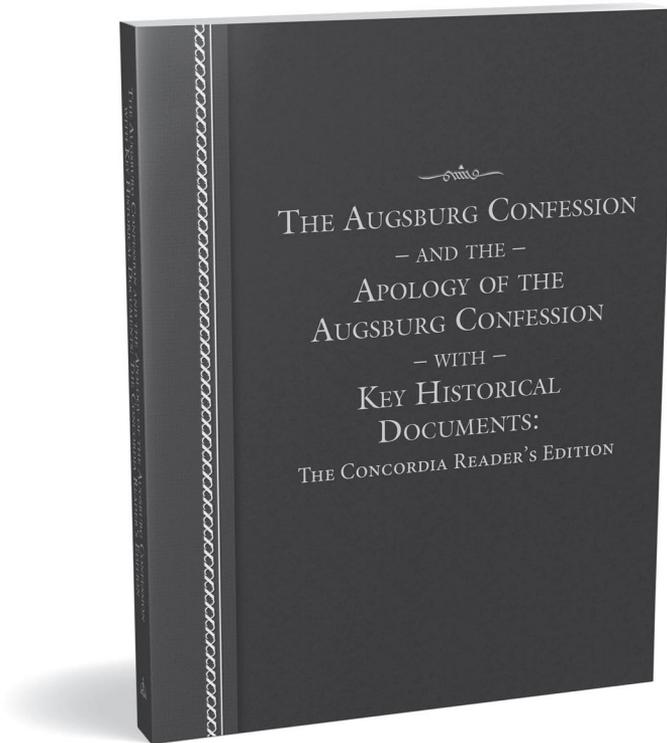
Given the importance of communion and its proper usage, a book that puts everything into perspective is helpful for pastors and elders who might struggle to explain the more difficult aspects of communion. It is also suitable for Christian laity who want to move beyond a Small Catechism understanding of the sacrament.

It should be noted that the book does not intend to provide a complete systematics of communion. You won't get the depth and theological connections you might if you read Luther's writings or those of other theologians who have written extensively on the subject. Rather, this book picks out a few topics within the subject and deals with them at a level most confirmed Christians should be able to handle.

In this regard, the book does an admirable job. The narrative setting keeps the book from sounding like a theological treatise and invites the reader to listen in as the characters chew on meaty questions that have caused divisions within the church. The book never moves too fast to follow and deals with many of the arguments raised against a biblical understanding of the sacrament. Even for someone more interested in a fully developed systematics of communion, this book still has value since it so succinctly attends to the fundamentals. It could be used in a Bible study setting, addressing each major question one at a time and examining the various arguments made for and against the biblical understanding. This is book would be a welcome addition to a church library as a helpful tool for those who want to get a better grasp on the confusing aspects of communion while also getting a peek at the bounty God offers through it.

*Richard Davenport
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