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Of She Bears and Y2K *Foy Valentine*

Remarks at James Dunn's Retirement Dinner *Bill Moyers*

Life Together: The Biblical Understanding of Community *William E. Hull*

"If It Feels Good, Do It" *Charles Wellborn*

Feminism Goes to Seed *Rebecca Merrill Groothuis*

When Life Becomes More Than a Body Can Bear *Al Staggs*

A Hal Haralson Trilogy
Searching for Judy Christian
Law School at Thirty-Three
A Grease Rack Prayer

The Grandeur of God and the Love of Literature *Ralph Wood*

A Little Local Gun Control *Ron Sisk*

Reconciliation *Ralph Lynn*

KUDZU *Doug Marlette*

Of She Bears and Y2K

By Foy Valentine

Virgil said he wrote poetry like a she bear, gradually licking it into shape. (It took him seven years to write the 2183 lines of the *Georgics*.)

I am a little bit like Virgil. Make that a little bitty bit.

This offering has only very slowly been licked into some semblance of shape. For five years, I have usually tried to sound in this column a light and, I have hoped, a sometimes lilting note. Under the general rubric of Paul’s “...whatsoever things are...lovely...think on these things”, I have aspired to elicit an occasional smile, spread a random ray of sunshine, accentuate the positive, and avoid making sows’ ears out of silk purses.

At this moment, however, I feel under some constraint to be more sober.

The reasons: (1) this journal has now been published for five years, and this last issue of Volume 5 is something of a natural milestone (“curst be he,” to borrow words from Shakespeare’s modest tombstone in Stratford, who reads this as millstone); (2) in a few days now we are scheduled to close out one millennium and usher in a new one, a portentous occasion, as mortals reckon such things (I think it is to my credit that in five years I have never once in this column uttered the Y2K mantra); and (3) besides, at 76 I am terminally (I use the word—shall I say macabrely) aware that I have not the leisure of eternity in which to prophesy for “the moving finger writes and having writ moves on” as old Khayyam put it. In the great Indianapolis 500 race of life, the flags are long since down and the last laps have begun.

So, is there any word from the Lord?

One respected body of Christian believers, the Shorter Catechism Presbyterians, allows that the “chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Unaccustomed as I am to doing everything “decently and in order,” as those Presbyterians so admirably do, I am more inclined to pick at that morsel of truth than I am to swallow it whole; but, still it keeps rearing its handsome head to be the catalyst for this particular licking into shape of this particular cub.

What is to be said about this God we would glorify and enjoy forever?

God is. It is a faith declaration. As Job said, “I know that my Redeemer liveth” (19:25). In the late 1930s when Adolph Hitler was tightening his death grip on Germany, Karl Barth

was driven from his teaching post at the University in Bonn. Fleeing to his native Switzerland he enlisted as a private in the army where he remained until the war was over. At that time he returned to his teaching position in Bonn. Amid the noise of the cranes and caterpillars rebuilding from the bombed rubble, Karl Barth assembled his first class for his first lecture. His first words were, “*Ich glaube an Gott*”—I believe in God. Those are the first words of the Apostles’ Creed. And those must be my first words here, “I believe in God.” They are words to carry us into the new millennium. If we are to glorify God and enjoy him forever, we must “believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Moreover we have to know something about him.

These things we believe we know.

God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29; 1 John 5:7). The people of God are totally immersed in this profoundest of convictions. It is the first of the commandments. It is the clearest and plainest of God’s revelations: God is one. He is “all and in all” (Col. 3:11), but he is not many. He is omnipresent, but he is not fragmented. As God is one, his people are to be like him in singleness of heart and mind and vision with one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

God is Holy (Leviticus 11:44; Psalm 99:9; 1 Peter 1:16). Holiness means whole, wholly other, exalted, worthy, sacred; but it also means morally pure, perfect in goodness, complete in righteousness, upright, clean, ethically uncompromised and uncompromising. As God is holy, so his people are ordered to be holy. A tall order. It is the labor of a lifetime as believers work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

God is Spirit (John 4:24). He is more than matter, above matter, under matter, beyond matter. That God is spirit does not mean that he is anti-matter but that he transcends matter. As God is spirit, so his people are to be spiritually oriented, not preoccupied with Pokemon trivia or all the other things of this world, laying not up for ourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal.

God is Peace (Judges 6:24 RSV). It would be shocking if the great God of peace who taught his people to say Shalom had not revealed himself precisely as he has done in Gideon’s words recorded in Judges 6:24, “The Lord is peace.” Because God is peace, his peacemaker people are to do “the things that make for peace.”

God is Light (1 John 1:5). In him is no darkness at all. As shekinah glory, consummate brilliance, shining purifier, revealing redeemer, kindly light, our God has shown himself to be

(continued on page 20)

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Remarks at James Dunn's Retirement Dinner

By Bill Moyers

[These remarks were made by Bill Moyers at the dinner for James Dunn on the occasion of his retirement as Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, in Washington, D.C., on October 4, 1999. Bill Moyers is a journalist.]

It's hard enough to follow the President of the United States on this platform, but it's even harder to deliver a eulogy when the deceased is still with us.

But what was I to do when Dunn said he would rather have us lie about him when he's alive, than tell the truth about him after he's gone.

It looks as if Dunn's retirement is going to last until he is satisfied that he has the eulogy he deserves. Even this dress rehearsal had a dress rehearsal. I'm serious. He insisted on a "prehumous" service in New York a month ago, which he pressured the Associated Baptist Press to sponsor, but none of the eulogies, he decided, were seemed worthy of the subject (including the one he delivered himself, which began, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," and ended—90 minutes later—with "....that government of, by, and for the people shall not perish from the earthfor thine is the kingdom ...and...the power and the glory forever ...and I regret that I have but one life to give for the halls of Montezuma and the shores of Tripoliso help me God, till death do us part, kingdom without end, bringing in the sheavesworld without endand the twilight's last gleaming ...when the saints go marching in.")

I mean, we're not dealing with a teeny, weeny ego here.

If he has his way, we'll still be celebrating his retirement on the eve of the next millenniumduring Hillary's last termfollowing what the fundamentalists say will be the thousand-year-reign of our blessed Lord from his (presumably air conditioned) office in Jerusalem.

But seriously:

For several years after leaving Washington, D.C., for New York, we lived in the township where Hezekiah Smith was born in 1737. Smith went forth from there to preach the Word in the vast spiritual precincts of the South, traveling 4,235 bruising miles on horseback. From his labors came one of the first Baptist missionary societies and, because Baptists also believed in the life of the mind as well as the power of the spirit, the founding of Brown University.

Baptists also believed in freedom. Hezekiah Smith volunteered in Washington's army. Of Washington's twenty-one brigade chaplains six were Baptists, each of whom had grieved at having been taxed by colonial governments to support the established church. We have it on the authority of Washington

himself that "Baptists were throughout America uniformly and almost unanimously the firm friends to civil liberty...and our glorious revolution."

When I think of Hezekiah Smith I think of James Dunn.

Last summer I drove through Groton, Connecticut. A historical marker says that Valentine Wightman organized a Baptist church in 1705 when the fine for forming "separate companies of worship in private houses"—was 10 shillings "for every such offense."

When I think of Valentine Wightman I think of James Dunn.

Once on a vacation in Maine I stood where a Baptist church was organized in 1641 by William Screven. For exercising his conscience on the issue of baptism, Screven was imprisoned and fined. Under constant harassment of government and religious authorities, he finally led his little congregation of seventeen souls all the way to South Carolina in search for liberty.

When I think of William Screven I think of James Dunn.

On another trip to New England I drove through Lynn, Massachusetts. There, in 1751, Obadiah Holmes was given thirty stripes with a three-corded whip after he violated the colonial law against taking communion with another Baptist. Baptists were only a "pitiful negligible minority" in Massachusetts but they were denounced as "the incendiaries of the Commonwealth and the infectors of persons in matter of religion." For refusing to pay tribute to the official state religion they were fined, flogged, and exiled. Holmes refused the offer of friends to pay his fine so that he could be released. He refused the strong drink they said would anesthetize the pain. Sober, he endured the ordeal; sober still, he would one day write: "It is the love of liberty that must free the soul."

You guessed it: When I think of Obadiah Holmes, I think of James Dunn.

Not all stripes of conscience are physical; not all wounds inflicted for liberty are visible.

James Dunn belongs to a long train of Baptists who have struggled—and often suffered—for a free church in a free state. Freedom is the bedrock of our faith. The Baptist scholar Walter Rauschenbusch said it this way: "The Christian faith as Baptists hold it, sets spiritual experience boldly to the front as the one great thing in religion." That experience is unique to each of us; God moves in mysterious ways, and the mystery is made manifest one by one.

At the core of our faith is what we call "soul competency," the competence of the individual before God. Created with the imprint of divinity, from the mixed clay of earth, we are

endowed with the capacity to choose, to be what James Dunn calls “responsible,” a grown-up before God.

At last count there were twenty-seven varieties of Baptists in America. My particular crowd holds that while the Bible is our anchor, it is no icon; that revelation continues; that truth is not frozen in doctrine but emerges from experience and encounter; that the City of God, is a past, present, and future community whose inhabitants are not all alike and some of whom may even surprise us in being counted among the faithful. In Jesus Christ we see the power of the Living Word over tired practice and dead belief. In his relationship with women, the sick, the outcast, and the stranger—even with the hated tax collector—Jesus broke new ground. The literal observance of the law was not to quench the spirit of justice. “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

These beliefs do not make for lawless anarchy or the religion of lone rangers. They do not mean we can float safely on the little raft of our own faith while the community flounders. They are the ground of personhood. They aim for a community with moral integrity (despite our fallenness as human beings), the wholeness that flows from mutual obligation. Our religion is an adventure in freedom within boundaries of accountability.

Essential to our faith is the conviction that no government can be permitted to compromise any soul’s exercise of freedom. For any government to say, “This experience is more to be preferred by the state than that one,” is the slippery slope to the subversion of all faith. Accordingly, we see the separation of church and state as the first line of constitutional defense in protecting that “one great thing in religion” against coercion—the individual’s own experience with God. Every generation must take up the challenge because the threat to religious liberty is as perennial as the seasons, as inevitable as the rising and setting of the sun.

In our time the threat has come not from a direct assault by government; it has come from within the Christian community. In the past 20 years reactionary Baptists forged an alliance to take over a major political party and promote an agenda of state-sanctioned prayer, public subsidies, and government privileges. Their first, and most successful, strategy was to seize control of the Southern Baptist Convention, whose pews they envisioned as precincts of power.

It was a remarkable coup, and it was made possible by exploiting an unsuspecting laity’s respect for the Bible. Most Baptists grow up believing the Bible to be the sufficient authority for our faith and practice; its witness to revelation we take as the starting point for our own spiritual growth over

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a lifetime of attempting to learn and to apply what the Scriptures tell us. There is always incipient in this belief the danger of idolatry, of exalting the Bible as holy instead of the God whose spirit moves within it. Rauschenbusch, among others, warned against Baptists who would “use the Bible just as other denominations use their creed.” He feared that just as in Catholicism only priests could consecrate the sacraments and forgive sins, so among Baptists an elect would declare: “You must believe everything which we tell you the Bible means and says.” They would impose on everyone else “their little interpretation of the great Book as the creed to which all good Baptists must cleave.”

Incredibly, this is what happened. The cabal that took over the Southern Baptist Convention could only succeed by a supreme act of ecclesiastical arrogance. They had to make themselves undisputed masters of doctrine. But Baptists have no

doctrine to control, given our conviction that personal experience—that “one great thing”—makes each of us responsible for understanding God’s will in our lives. So what if the conspirators substituted the Bible itself for the “one great thing” and then asserted the primacy of their biblical interpretation over the validity of personal spiritual experience? Individual men and women would no longer have to interpret the text themselves; the preacher would do that for them, backed up by an ecclesiastical imperium. Churches that had governed themselves democratically now took a radical turn; the laity would be subjugated to the preacher who would in turn serve the denominational politburo, which alone would decide who is, and isn’t, a Baptist. With the dissidents excluded there would be no one to protest any assault on the wall between church and state. The entire apparatus could then be safely aligned with political operatives who slickly promised the restoration of a “Christian America.”

It was a brilliant, if heretical strategy, and James Dunn saw the implications immediately. As head of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (BJC) in Washington, D.C., his charge was to identify and resist just such alliances between church and state; he was to be the watchdog that barked when church or state climbed over the other’s backyard fence. A cause to bark surfaced in the 1980s. A BJC staffer learned that a resolution passed by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1982, calling for a Constitutional amendment in support of school prayer, had actually been drafted by a White House assistant. James pronounced the action to be “the most glaring illustration of the successful attempt of secular politics to move into the denomination.” There were other examples, as the pious men with the cold eyes now in command of the Convention launched a series of stealth moves to align the

organization to partisan causes. You have to try to imagine the pain James Dunn must have felt sounding the trumpet against his own denomination; he had spent his whole life as a servant of the Southern Baptist Convention; he was himself a theological conservative. But as a matter of conscience he felt obliged to declare that the new order's political designs were an attack on religious freedom.

When he spoke out, they tried to silence him. When he would not be silenced, they tried to fire him, as they had summarily and cruelly purged other denominational employees who would not bow to the new orthodoxy. Fortunately, Dunn's own BJC board, which in addition to the Southern Baptist Convention includes representatives from eight other Baptist denominations, refused to abandon him. Now the theological Stalinists cut his budget. He went out and raised funds to make up the loss. Not only could the watchdog bark, but he could also bite, and the poachers of the First Amendment soon found the seats of their pants in shreds.

The Lenin of the SBC—the man who plotted and perpetrated the takeover—had determined that reactionaries would be named to run every one of the denomination's seminaries, colleges, boards, and agencies. But he had more than religious power in mind. It turned out that he was a card-carrying member of a secret organization of right wing ideologues and political activists — The Council on National Policy — who met regularly to coordinate their political and religious agendas. Its members included Senator Jesse Helms, Oliver North, Jerry Falwell, Joseph Coors, and Phyllis Schlafly, among others. I inadvertently stumbled on this fellow's membership while reporting for a documentary series on "God and Politics." When I pressed him on camera about his membership in the secret organization, he grew indignant and broke off the interview.

By this time he held the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention under his thumb, and he demanded that it pass a resolution censuring me. His allies went after the corporate sponsor of my television series, who was pressured to withdraw its support of my work. But as an independent journalist, I was essentially beyond their wrath and reach.

James Dunn was another matter—or so they thought—and their lust for vengeance now fell on him. His new affront,

as they named it, was to appear in the documentary and talk about soul freedom. Let me repeat for you what James Dunn told me in that interview:

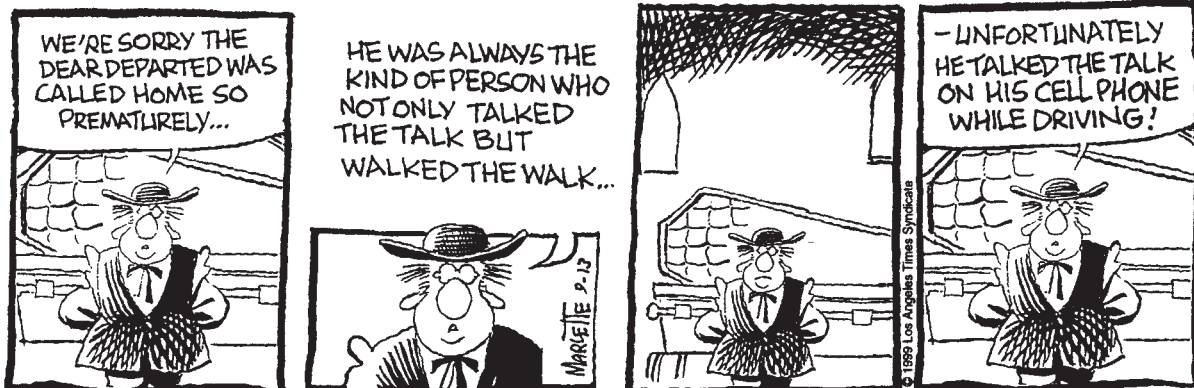
Freedom of conscience is not simply the popular kind of man-on-the-street understanding of freedom of conscience, but freedom of conscience as an innate, inherent, universal right for every human beingThe right to say no to God, the right to say no to any and all assaults on the intellect. The right to say no to any and all appeals to the imagination and emotions. The insistence upon bowing the knee to no man — that's been right at the heart of whatever makes Baptists different.

A scandalous opinion, and it riled the reactionaries, who wanted no challenge to the blanket of conformity they were pulling across the Southern Baptist Convention. They were further enraged that he would go on national television at all! The man was clearly an "incendiary of the Commonwealth" and since it was no longer permissible to flog dissenters, they would have to resort to other measures to rid their theocracy of him.

At first they attempted to smear him, but this proved hard to do to a man who doesn't cuss, smoke, drink, or think harshly even of Methodists. They did succeed in defunding the BJC, cutting off its every last dime of financial support from the Southern Baptist Convention. Rarely have I witnessed such courage and perseverance as was then exhibited by James, his staff, and board. As most of you know, he and the BJC survived to fight another day, and another, and another, subsequently winning some of their most important victories in the continuing battle for religious liberty.

What is his secret? He believes in a very big God. Rauschenbusch again:

Little beliefs make little men (and women) ...It is possible to play 'Nearer, my God to Thee' with one finger on a little reed organ of four octaves. But it is very different music when the same melody is played with all the resources of a great pipe organ, and in all the richness of full harmony.



James pulls out all the stops and pumps with all his might. Watching him in action, I am reminded that God sends his messengers in odd shapes and sizes and from unexpected places. Who would have predicted that one of the most effective advocates of religious freedom in our time would grow up on the east side of a Texas cow town, talk like a horse trader, and dress like a trail driver? Who would ever have imagined that such a quaint little fellow would become one of the most tireless champions of social justice and Christian ethics in the last quarter of the 20th century?

Sometimes in my mind's eye I see him climbing the Capitol steps, toting a Bible in one hand and a voting tally in another. From one he draws his principles and from the other his prowess. "I don't want a man up there who can't count votes," Lyndon Johnson once said as he marched his staff up to Congress on the day a key bill hung in the balance. James can count. He can also sniff, and sniffing is the art of the bloodhound.

Baptists have never had a more savvy master of the legislative process, where the most offensive infringement of religious liberty can be inflicted in fine print no one else bothers to read until it is too late. A lesser man would have been blind sided by the likes of Pat Robertson and his Robespierre, Ralph Reed, who once boasted that the Religious Right had "learned how to move under radar in the cover of the night with shrubbery strapped to our helmets." True, but just when they were about to make off with the First Amendment, James Dunn hove into sight; like a man with radar implants in the corner of his eyes. The back room boys learned long ago that they couldn't blow smoke in his eyes; he earned their respect for his shrewdness, integrity, and utter lack of self aggrandizement. With his instincts and talents he could have become an influential lobbyist, raking in huge fees from powerful interests. But James Dunn chose a different course.

He was chosen, rather. I have no doubt of this. Like his mentors, J.M. Dawson and T. B. Maston, the mystery of the Christ event has been central to James' understanding of his faith and practice. The encounter occurred early on and it transformed him, producing a principled commitment to action and aware at every turn of that transcendent Presence. Some of you in this room will remember from our seminary days Wheeler Robinson's profile of the Baptist tradition:

Nothing atones for the absence of those memories of childhood and youth which are progressively hallowed by the faith of the adult and gain a richer interpretation by the experience of life. The familiar walls of the

The Lenin of the SBC—the man who plotted and perpetrated the takeover...was a card-carrying member of a secret organization of right wing ideologues and political activists — The Council on National Policy — who met regularly to coordinate their political and religious agendas.

church, the familiar phrases of prayer and praise, gain a sacramental quality, so as to be inseparable in memory from the experience they mediated. They have helped to bring us into a living tradition, so that we might discover 'how great a thing it is' to live at the end of so many ages....

It's quite a story how James Dunn arrived into that living tradition; how this clarinet-playing, foot-tapping, hymn-singing good ol' boy earned his place in that cloud of witnesses that includes Smith, Wightman, Screven, Rauschenbusch, Dawson, Maston, and so many others; how he found in his beloved Marilyn a life-long soulmate; how he has stood at one Thermopylae after another.

My own life has been indelibly touched by James Dunn. Through thick and thin he has been my friend. He took in our youngest son and befriended our daughter; he even defended me when I was pictured on the front pages of every newspaper in the country in 1965 doing the Watusi! Almost half a century ago Marilyn, then his fiance, was critically injured in a car wreck near my home town of Marshall, Texas. James rushed from Ft. Worth to be at her side. My mother, Ruby, just happened to be at the hospital where he waited for news of Marilyn's condition. He was a stranger, and when my

mother heard what had happened, she introduced herself to him, learned he was from Southwestern Seminary, and insisted that he make our home his home until the crisis passed. He never forgot her.

Ruby Moyers died in April at the age of ninety-one. James was scheduled to speak that weekend — as he does practically every weekend—at some distant church on behalf of religious liberty (what else?). I assumed he would not—could not—make it to the funeral in deep East Texas. But I looked up and there he was. In the funeral parlor he joined in the family circle as nieces and nephews, grandchildren and cousins, recalled their own experiences with my mother. Then, during the service at the Central Baptist Church, James recounted his own first meeting with her, and spoke movingly of her kindness to him.

And then he was gone—to catch one more plane to one more city for one more testimony to one more Baptist church whose congregation he would summon to remembrance of that "one great thing."

Who would not cherish such a brother?

There's the eulogy. But here's the epilogue.

It wasn't until a week ago Sunday that I realized how to frame this occasion. It was then I truly saw in perspective James' life and work.

Judith and I were in Nacogdoches, Texas, on personal business and were invited by friends to worship on Sunday at Austin Heights Baptist Church on the outskirts of town, with a congregation of about a hundred people.

The church had been founded thirty years ago by five families who could no longer abide the racial exclusiveness or squinted theology of the home church. The new church struggled for two decades and ten years ago called Kyle Childress as pastor, forging since then a vigorous witness under his leadership.

The Saturday before our visit several members spent the day helping to build a new home with Habitat for Humanity.

The church maintains a partnership with two black churches and the pastor's attendance at meetings of the black ministerial alliance has discomfited some members of the white alliance.

Nancy Sehested once preached at the church and had to cross a picket line of other Baptists in town who think it's blasphemous for a woman to be in the pulpit.

Women were integral to the service we attended. One read from Isaiah's call "To spare not, to lift up thy voice like a trumpet in behalf of the naked, the hungry, and the oppressed."

Another woman threaded her a cappella solo throughout the pastor's sermon on the subject of "Glorifying God in Music." The compilation of word and song charged the room and sent a tingle up my spine.

But it was during the prayer concerns that I was hit full force by this church's power as a healing, serving community.

They prayed for Troy whose wife Vee had been buried that week as he mourned in his wheel-chair.

They prayed for a neighbor rushed at 4:30 that morning to the hospital with symptoms of a heart attack.

They prayed for a victim of Alzheimer's.

They prayed for Clayton caring for his cancer-stricken wife.

They prayed for the family struggling to support Gladys, frail and helpless at 98.

They prayed for Maggie and Roger's children in Indonesia ...and for Bill Jones' son Matt who has a brain tumor, and for the victims and families of the shooting at the Baptist church in Fort Worth.

Behind us a college professor raised his hand and asked the church to pray for his beloved student who had died that week of a rare disease, and they prayed for her and for him, for his

heart was broken. They prayed for his broken heart.

A broken world was there that morning, in need of repair, one-by-one. And the Presence of the Lord was in that place. Within these aqua-colored walls with their white trim and simple wooden cross there was a rendezvous of hope, love, and healing.

What was happening there could not be explained by bumper sticker doctrine or fortune cookie theology.

There was nothing to explain the moment except a people's openness to each other and the arrival of grace.

As the congregation closed the service I wrote in the program:

This is what the fight's been about. This is what Dunn and so many others have sacrificed to defend—the fight of these people to take the church where it would go ...to worship as conscience inspires.

And I wrote: "Dunn would be at home here."

Would you believe? As we were leaving I told Pastor Kyle Childress that I had been touched by the service and that I was also grateful to him for informing a talk I would be giving in Washington eight days hence.

"For what purpose?" he asked. And I told him that we were going to Washington to honor a fellow Baptist upon his retirement as head of the Baptist Joint Committee.

"James Dunn?" he said, "Do you mean James Dunn?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

He laughed and said: "James Dunn preached the first revival we held here ten years ago."

"What a coincidence. He's been on my mind all morning."

And he laughed again. "Yes, ten years ago we were a new suburban church poised for greatness. Then James Dunn came down to preach and put us straight and we've been a little bitty church ever since."

Later I wrote this down, too: This is how the kingdom grows. God works in the wedges, through the cracks, along the fault line of schisms, until conformity and orthodoxy can no longer hold the mind hostage to habit or the spirit captive.

The fight had to happen for the kingdom to spread, in "little bitty churches" that witness to a great and mighty faith.

James and Marilyn, you have not labored in vain. ■



Life Together: The Biblical Understanding of Community

By William E. Hull

[Dr. William E. Hull is University Professor at Samford University. He is a frequent contributor to *Christian Ethics Today*. This material was delivered as a Bible Study to the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, June 25, 1999.]

The most cohesive force uniting the People of God during their long journey through Scripture was a tenacious sense of community. Over the centuries their life assumed many forms: family clan, tribal confederation, national monarchy, faithful remnant, holy congregation, sectarian commune, messianic movement. They were led by patriarchs, judges, kings, priests, scribes, apostles, and elders. Often challenged by external conflict or by internal controversy, they nevertheless maintained continuity in the midst of change because of an unshakable conviction that they had been chosen and called by God.

This towering achievement despite the cruel vicissitudes of history speaks powerfully to our modern yearning for community. In the public arena, scholars such as Robert Bellah worry that American individualism may have withered a concern for the common good so important to our nation's founders.¹ In the private sphere, such factors as restless nomadism and spiraling divorce rates have shattered community and family solidarity, resulting in what David Riesman described with poignancy as "the lonely crowd."² In a day of congregational and denominational fragmentation, it is no wonder that Daniel Vestal defined one of his highest priorities for the fellowship as the nurturing of a robust sense of community. For as T. S. Eliot put it:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.³

When we turn to the Bible in search of the source of its remarkable solidarity, we seem to confront only bewildering diversity. There is no recommended model of connectedness, no formula for forging the blest "ties that bind." Instead, we find many different patterns, each designed to meet a fresh challenge confronting the People of God. Almost every difference within and between various religious groups today is foreshadowed in its pages. By other names we find there Charismatics and Catholics, Fundamentalists and Formalists, Apocalypticists and Accommodationists. But it is precisely in the struggle to understand this complexity that we are able to identify those options best suited for our time. So let us look at the

seven major eras during which community unfolded in the dialogue of the Biblical People of God with their history, then ask how we may respond to our changing times in ways that "nurture community" among Baptists.⁴

I. Exodus and Conquest

Our story begins in the bleakness of a "house of bondage." Despite divine assurances to Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites found themselves enslaved in Egypt, without any protection or power or promise for the future. But God intervened to deliver them from poverty and oppression. Not only did he lead them through the sea, across the wilderness, and into a land of their own, but he gave them their freedom by which, in a voluntary act of self-determination, they entered into a covenant with their Redeemer that forever shaped the character of their community. Three convictions lay at the heart of this revolutionary new relationship to God.

(1) The first was that they owed their very existence to the divine initiative. They were a chosen people, but he was the chooser. They were called to a new destiny, but he was the caller. Without his antecedent grace and sustaining presence they would still be helpless in the brokenness of bondage. Therefore they were to honor God as the supreme and exclusive Sovereign of life. Note how their charter, the Decalogue, begins:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of
the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
You shall have *no other* gods before me (Exodus 20:2-3).

This was not some theological refinement of monotheism but was a repudiation of the dominant ancient myth according to which imperial rulers such as the Egyptian Pharaoh were viewed as divine and their royal courts as the earthly counterpart of heaven. In giving allegiance only to Yahweh, Israel could not submit to any hierarchical power structure used to legitimate an earthly ruling class.

(2) Second, these emancipated slaves realized that they had been delivered, not because of any intrinsic merit on their part, but because their God was a righteous judge determined to end their unfair treatment. After groveling under Egyptian taskmasters for generations, they were permitted to see that the greatest power in the universe is on the side of the downtrodden, that the God who created order out of chaos is determined to bring peace with justice to all the earth. Because God acted in holiness to end Egyptian oppression, the beneficiaries of his intervention were to embody that holiness in their corporate life.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me . . . a *holy nation* (Exodus 19:4-6).

This is why the covenant soon became a Covenant Code with specific guidelines to regulate behavior, why the Decalogue eventually included a comprehensive list of commandments, why Torah evolved, not merely as a legalistic compendium, but as an overarching effort to norm the culture of the community by the righteousness of God.

(3) Third, the willingness of God to hear the cries of an afflicted people (Exodus 3:7-8) was an expression, not only of his holy justice, but of his tender mercies as well (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). This meant that the community was to be characterized, not only by a stringent standard of righteousness, but by an openness and concern for all of God's family, particularly the vulnerable such as strangers, widows, and beggars. Because all members of the community shared a common origin in the degradation of slavery, they were all equal in status. Paul Hanson has well expressed the significance of this egalitarian impulse: "A pattern of social construction thus arose in Israel that resisted the dominant one in antiquity: here was a society constructed not by the privileged and the elite, but by ordinary folk, by former slaves drawing their guidelines from the example of a God who embraced the cause of the weak against the powerful oppressor."⁵

Application: Like the Israelites of old, Baptists began as a tiny marginalized movement on the fringes of society, their religious aspirations oppressed by hierarchical structures of both church and state. Spiritually we were slaves to a Constantinian myth enforced by punishment so arbitrary and so cruel that imprisonment or even martyrdom might result. But with our Puritan forebears we went into the wilderness seeking a new land of freedom on foreign shores. Persecution continued in the colonial context until the American revolution liberated us to achieve our destiny as a free and faithful people. In gratitude we bowed the knee only to God, repudiat-

ing every form of religious "establishment." We gladly accepted the sterner disciplines of a "sectarian" morality and became noted for our evangelistic fervor in reaching the so-called "lower classes" of society. To be sure, this was a harsh and demanding era, but it was one of strength and growth which made us champions of that democratic experiment which finally shattered the elitist structures of antiquity.

But now we are in danger of forgetting the house of bondage in which we were born. Our worship in sanctuaries of affluence is far more concerned to identify us as key players in the reigning establishment than as servants of the God who is sovereign over every ideology and power structure in modern culture. Since our religious freedom is no longer suppressed by kings or popes, we now use it to test the traditional limits of ethical permissiveness, shrugging off inherited Codes of conduct as "petty legalisms." So captive have we become to middle class culture that we, mostly, sat on our hands through the civil rights struggle and now find it hard not to act condescendingly toward the intellectual underclass with only a high school education. Our last great generation of denominational leaders came out of abject poverty (E. Y. Mullins, George W. Truett, R. G. Lee, J. M. Dawson) and it remains to be seen whether we can survive the prosperity that engulfed us once we left behind the Egypt of our European and Colonial origins.

II. Monarchy and Prophecy

Israel's refusal to entrust its community to the leadership of a centralized hierarchy soon put it at risk from neighboring kingdoms, especially of the Egyptians and the Philistines. Fearful of their security in a land surrounded by hostile forces, the people began to clamor for a king of their own, a move bitterly opposed by those determined to have no sovereign but God. The turning point came with Samuel, who reluctantly agreed to the compromise of a limited monarchy in which the earthly ruler would be appointed by God, his continuing rule would be conditioned on approval by God, and his successor would be chosen by God rather than by dynastic kinship. Nevertheless, the move was fraught with danger because a community founded on equality for all, including the disen-



franchised, was about to take on the trappings of centralized authority and royal hubris which had corrupted the societies of surrounding nations.

Specifically, who would police the king on behalf of God to insure his compliance with the terms of limited monarchy? If, by definition, the sovereign was to rule all of the people, then who could hold him accountable for a reign of righteousness and compassion? The answer was that concurrent with the rise of monarchy came the rise of prophecy. It was precisely the role of the prophet, acting independently of all earthly authority, to measure the king against the same standards as all other members of the covenant community. This is why Samuel, the last of the judges, became the first of the prophets when Saul was installed as king. His farewell address in I Samuel 12:19-25 well summarizes the threefold mission of the prophet to unceasingly “pray for you” (v. 23), To “instruct you in the good and the right way” (v. 23), and to warn that “if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you *and your king*” (v. 25).

Saul’s troubled reign, was transitional at best but, with David, the kingship was greatly strengthened both politically, in response to a dire threat posed by the Philistines, and religiously by his moves to make Jerusalem the national center both of government and of worship. The king now became the patron of a temple which served as his royal chapel where worship celebrated not only the reign of Yahweh but the reign of his son, the king, as well. Despite the freedom of the prophet Nathan to rebuke David for his affair with Bathsheba, the throne soon passed by dynastic succession to his son, Solomon, who confirmed the worst fears of those who had opposed monarchy: consolidation of power, centralized control, punitive taxation, concentration of military might in the hands of the king, stratification of society with a wealthy class at the top and a captive labor force at the bottom, pagan influences at court through multiple marriages designed to facilitate foreign policy. As the kingdom of Solomon grew in earthly glory, it became virtually indistinguishable in the minds of the people from the kingdom of God. Most significantly, God’s conditional covenant with his people was reinterpreted as an unconditional covenant with the king.

This dangerous excursion into the corridors of power, a move which collapsed the critical distance between throne and altar, resulted in a time of testing for the exodus faith of Israel. To borrow modern categories, it seemed politically risky to maintain the *separation* of church and state, a decentralized tribal confederation with local militia and multiple sanctuaries being no match for the monolithic strength of neighboring foes. At the same time, it proved just as religiously risky to

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attempt the *union* of church and state and thereby confuse God’s sovereign purpose to establish universal peace through righteousness and compassion with the petty intrigues that converged on an ancient oriental court. The prophets were fearless in calling the kings to account, but their efforts to penetrate a protective palace culture proved increasingly futile. It is not accidental that the record reflects a conspicuous absence of prophetic intervention during the reign of Solomon (II Chronicles 9:29).

Application: As Baptists moved from the margins of society in Europe to the center of life in America, they aspired to influence a culture beset by many foes. Immigration brought “foreign” influences increasingly into play. Industrialization created huge impersonal corporations, especially in the cities, where materialism reigned supreme; The Philistines of secularism infiltrated once godly colleges and universities with their scientific naturalism. The stronger Baptists became internally, the weaker they seemed to become as an influence in the public square. Meanwhile, ever since FDR had used government to defeat the Depression and our Axis enemies, it had

grown more powerful than any agency in society, with talk of an “imperial presidency” that would have made revolutionary patriots shudder. If only we could form an alliance between church and state—informal to be sure!—that would give us enough clout to defeat the enemies all about us. A few Supreme Court appointees sympathetic to school prayers, a constitutional amendment on abortion, voucher funds for Christian schools—the politics would be messy but the results would be worth it all.

And so we began to gravitate toward the centers of power in Washington, some favoring the Carter Democrats and others favoring the Reagan Republicans. But politicians do not like divided loyalties, and soon the electronic evangelists taught us how to have (so they imagined) to have even more clout by aligning ourselves unambiguously with only one party. Before long the wall of separation was breached and the great defense of its validity by George W. Truett, delivered on the steps of the U. S. Capitol in 1920, was eventually dismissed even by his successor in Dallas. A few prophets among us have resisted the siren song of governmental support but it is hard to hear their voices above the clamor of those who insist that, without the help of political leaders, America might be lost as a “Christian nation.” Consider what an amazing anachronism James Dunn has become on the eve of his retirement as almost the only lobbyist in Washington pleading for less governmental favors for his constituency rather than for more!

III. Division and Exile

One of the deepest ironies of Israel's history is that the nation fell apart at precisely the moment when it appeared to be most unified and powerful. Solomon had carried the consolidation process to a point of almost total control, but no sooner did he die than his empire split into a Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam and a Southern Kingdom under Rehoboam. For the next 350 years, Israel in the north and Judah in the south paid a heavy price for their misadventure into power politics. Hereditary kingship bred endless corruption at the very core of public life. Jeroboam did evil above all that were before him, provoking God utterly to consume his house "as a man burns dung until it is gone" (I Kings 14:9-11). Rehoboam led Judah to commit more sins than all their fathers had done, introducing male cultic prostitutes into the land (I Kings 14:22-24). As the Biblical text marks the end of each dynastic succession, a steady refrain is heard: "he did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his fathers had done" (e.g. 11 Kings 13:2; 14:24; 15:9; 15:28; 17:2; 21:2; 8 23:32; 24:9).

This institutionalization of evil at the highest levels of society called forth the classic age of Hebrew prophecy beginning with Elijah's titanic struggle against Ahab and Jezebel. Voices such as Amos and Hosea in the North, Micah and Isaiah in the South, called the power structure to account and the people back to a God-centered religion of righteousness and compassion instead of a king-centered religion of presumption and exploitation. A few reforms were attempted, climaxed by the Deuteronomic reform under Josiah, but corruption was too entrenched for these well-meaning efforts to succeed. The old diseased body, wracked by centuries of compromise, would have to die so that a reborn community might take its place.

And die it did, first under Assyria in the north (722 B.C.), then under Babylonia in the south (586 B.C.). The land was ravaged, Jerusalem was sacked and its temple destroyed, while the nation's leadership was deported into captivity. Jeremiah had seen the cancer of kingship and the sickness of religion so clearly that he knew a terrible calamity would overtake the community of a broken covenant. But even though it grieved him deeply, Jeremiah realized that God could use self-inflicted tragedy to give a new heart and make a new covenant with those who had forsaken him (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Once the cruel events of history confirmed the deepest forebodings of the weeping prophet, out of the abyss of exile Ezekiel seized on Jeremiah's hope for a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27) that would literally bring dry bones back from the dead (Ezekiel 37:1-14). His own contribution was to understand this happening through a restored Zadokite priesthood and a rebuilt Jerusalem Temple (Ezekiel 40-48) that would return purity to the land, an idea that was to have enormous consequences in the centuries that followed.

But it was the Isaiah of chapters 40-55 who, more than any other prophet, redefined the role of the exilic community. He dared to announce in the darkness of defeat that a new era of

salvation was about to dawn (40:3), led not by earthly kings but by the Sovereign Lord (40:10, 17, 23). At the heart of this renewal was no royal entourage but a righteous remnant of the poor and needy whose mission would not be to "raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel" but to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (49:6). Freed by political defeat from the agenda of competitive nationalism, Israel could now forsake every form of religious triumphalism and recover the dependence on divine strength which had led them as slaves out of Egypt. If only the exiles could grasp a vastly enlarged vision of God's majesty, they would realize that they had not so much lost a narrow strip of land in Palestine as they had gained the whole world as an arena of witness!

The supreme symbol of this transformed mission was expressed in the shocking image of a servant. Four songs, in particular, described one who was the very antithesis of kingly majesty (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:49; 52:13-53:12). But notice carefully that not once do any of these poems engage in victimization, as if the servant's humiliation were the fault of his enemies and so deserving of retribution. Nor is it the case that the servant merely personified the collective predicament of the exiles as an exercise in self-pity. No, these songs were not saying "Look how cruel are the Babylonians," or "Look how wretched are the Israelites." Rather, they depicted a servant who suffered for the suffering exiles:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows; . . .
He was wounded for our transgressions
he was bruised for our iniquities.
Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and by his wounds *we* are healed (53:4-5).

What does it mean that the servant suffered for *them*? Had not everyone in exile already suffered more than enough? It is not sufficient to say that here, in the depths of affliction, we encounter a concept of vicarious suffering which would, in the death of Jesus centuries later, give rise to our doctrine of atonement. What the Servant Songs were saying to their own day was that there are two ways to suffer. The world's way is to suffer in a seething bitterness that leads to vindictiveness and retaliation. Psalm 137 pictures all too vividly the feelings of those exiles who wept by the waters of Babylon:

O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock! (vv. 8-9)

But the prophet offered a diametrically different pedagogy of brokenness: from within their midst God would be pleased with those who deepened their agony by taking the festering enmity of the community upon themselves, who drew the sting of hostility against every foe by lodging it in their own

hearts, who made themselves accursed by refusing to practice the politics of revenge. For only as Israel was thus purged of its venom would it be able to witness to every nation with glad and generous hearts.

Application: Do I need to explain to anyone here what it means for Baptists to have had their kingdom divided and to have been driven into exile? Riding the crest of a post-war religious boom, we launched Bold Mission Thrust with the most ambitious goals in all our storied history. Even Solomon in all his glory could not have surpassed that achievement if only it had come to pass. But instead, when our leaders least expected it, we suddenly found ourselves split along ideological lines which had long been tolerated until we started playing national politics. For at least two decades we tried one “reform” after another—witness the futile exertions of the so-called SBC Peace Committee—but it was all too little and too late. A few prophets tried to call us back to our founding principles, but most folks paid little attention because they were too busy choosing up sides for a fight along party lines. Now that the battle is over, and the family has been divided into winners and losers, a central question is whether we are ready and willing to learn the hard lessons of exile.

At least three responses seek to evade the key issue: (1) Some seem willing to succumb to apathy, remorse, or even despair, as if God is not great enough to overcome our brokenness by giving a new spirit to our dry bones. (2) Others are eager to forget the past and strike out on a new course as if nothing had ever happened. (3) Yet others are itching for a chance to get even with their enemies and recapture Baptist Zion from the Babylonians. But none of these approaches faces squarely the question of the servant, namely: What shall we do with our frustration over losing institutions in which we have invested so dearly, with our indignation over having our most sacred beliefs questioned and held up to scorn, with our perplexity that so few seem to understand or to care what the issues really are? There is a great deal of talk about what we suffer *from*, but the servant songs ask us what we are willing to suffer *for*. Who among us will vicariously bear the burden of our bitterness in their own lives so that we will not visit it upon our enemies?

What Isaiah 40-55 is saying to us today is that, even after

we have broken our covenant and divided our kingdom, we can still save our battered community if only we will accept the mission of being God’s light to a darkened world. All of us, on all sides of Baptist life, continue to talk as if that is our highest priority. But the prophet knew that we cannot truly proclaim God’s peace to the Gentiles if all we are doing is projecting our own internal strife on them. We need not go half-way around the world to take the light to Nigerians and Indonesians if we cannot walk in the light with charismatics and fundamentalists and liberals who live across the street. The hard truth of exile is that *we cannot love all nations if we cannot love all Baptists!* What, then, shall we do with the head-bashing impulses of the past twenty years? Who among us is willing to be despised *by us*, and lose *our* esteem (Isaiah 53:3) because they ask us to give up the poisons of defeat that our hearts may be purified to serve a wider world? We now have more than enough winners and losers in our fratricidal strife. What we desperately need are more suffering servants!

IV. Return and Rebuilding

We have seen thus far that the Biblical People of God sought to build community around covenant, kingship, and mission. By the time of the exile, however, the original exodus covenant had been hopelessly compromised by the disobedience of those upon whom prophetic condemnation fell. The kingship had been toppled by foreign powers with no possibility of restoration in the foreseeable future. And what of the bracing call to a worldwide mission set forth in Isaiah 40-55? The servant role proved too idealistic for a battered and broken community to implement in the harsh climate of post-exilic Palestine. Instead of fading away, however, the legacy of exilic Isaiah became a visionary tradition that went “underground” as a living option to be claimed in the future. We see it surface in writings such as Joel, Ruth, and Jonah, with their counter-cultural plea for an other-directed inclusivism that would transcend the inner-directed exclusivism of post-exilic life. Meanwhile, three alternative approaches were developed that sought to build community around a restored Temple, a living Torah, and a heavenly Triumph. We may call this the strategy of multiple responses: when shattered and



helpless, try several things in the hope that at least one of them will work!

(1) Picking up on the legacy of Ezekiel, the Jews who began returning to Jerusalem reasoned thus: The monarchy is gone and our overlords, the Persians, will never let us have a king. So let us restore our worship center as the one institution in which home rule is permitted and look to its priests as our community leaders. The prophets had warned that God would allow us to be taken into captivity because of our corruption, hence our best hope for regaining divine favor is to major on purity and become a "holy nation." This was both a rational and a pragmatic response to their precarious condition as an impoverished vassal state — after all, the liturgical activities of a few priests in their pathetic rebuilt Temple would hardly concern the masters of the mighty Persian Empire. The only problem was that when the priests began to fill the political vacuum left by the fall of the king, this unleashed an internal power struggle between competing parties which resulted in the Zadokites seizing total control of the Temple and reducing the Levites to the status of minor clergy with menial duties. Unable to prevail over its enemies abroad, Israel created enemies within who could be conquered by intramural warfare that ruptured the harmony of the beleaguered community.

We need to pause over this seldom noticed partisan strife long enough to trace its consequences for the spirit of the community. Paul Hanson has expressed it well: as contending groups "focused primarily on their own partisan interests . . . in the heat of polemic, human authorities thus became confused with the ultimate authority, and Yahweh was clothed in the ideologies of the striving parties."⁶ "God was no longer revered as the universal creator and redeemer . . . but became the projection of one or the other party's self interest. The actual nexus of authority shifted from the nature of the God revealed in the saving events of history to the nature of the leadership claims of the individual parties Compassion ceased to be the open invitation extended by the community to those denied the protection of its structures and laws, and became a courtesy limited to members of one's own party."⁷

(2) A second strategy was to consolidate the community around allegiance to the Torah. To overcome the dissension caused by priestly squabbles, Nehemiah shrewdly capitalized upon the need of the Persians to strengthen their buffer states by rebuilding the fortifications of Jerusalem, thereby introducing a measure of order to an unstable and increasingly vulnerable situation. Within this clearly defined compound, Ezra installed the Mosaic Torah as a constitutional guide defining a dependable standard of righteousness at the center of Jewish life. Neither of these efforts was in competition with priestly reforms. Rather, the building program of Nehemiah strengthened the centralization of worship at the Jerusalem Temple and the interpretation and enforcement of the Torah by Ezra added enormous legal clout to the claims of the Zadokites (Ezra 7:25-26).

But the protectionism inherent in these measures carried with it the seeds of religious separatism that fostered with-

drawal and isolation. In strengthening the security of those on the inside, Nehemiah's walls excluded "all those of foreign descent" (Nehemiah 13:3) on the outside. Ezra's law came to be known as a wall guarding Israel from pagan corruption. Both men strongly opposed mixed marriages with foreigners (Nehemiah 13:23-25; Ezra 9:1-3) which they countered with a doctrine of "holy seed" that made heredity an important criterion in defining the identity of an Israelite. Obviously, the more that community life was determined by pre-existing hereditary structures, and the more it was regulated by immutable laws set forth in Torah, the less likely God was to do a surprising new thing in the future.

(3) This does not mean that eschatological hope withered in the face of pragmatic necessity; rather, the vision of messianic bliss was transformed from one of bringing light to one of inflicting vengeance on the nations. God was now portrayed as a divine warrior visiting punishment on Israel's enemies. Already the pattern appears in Ezekiel 38-39, Isaiah 24-27, and Zechariah 10-14, but nowhere more clearly than in the contrast between the emphasis of universal salvation in the exilic Isaiah 40-55 and the picture of universal slaughter in post-exilic Isaiah 56-66 (e.g. 63:1-6; 66:15-16). All of the frustration and resentment and bitterness of the struggling community was projected on that great cosmic battle which would determine the ultimate outcome of the struggle between good and evil. Only heaven itself could finally correct the cruel inequities of earth.

Application: For Baptists, Bold Mission Thrust was a noble attempt to open the life of our religious community to everyone in the whole wide world but, like the vision of exilic Isaiah, it proved too idealistic for the pluralism that was fragmenting American culture in the uneasy aftermath of the turbulent sixties and seventies. Afraid to throw our arms around an increasingly strange world that seemed to be changing before our eyes, we did exactly what post-exilic Israel did and fell into an internecine "preacher fight" that wracked our denomination with deadly controversy. Now we meet separately as Zadokites and as Levites, but the great majority of laity on both sides of the squabble has yet to decide what we shall do about these competing clergy groups. Perhaps we need a prophet like Malachi who delivered God's judgment on the priests of his day in words that were unspeakably harsh:

And now; O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings . . . Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung upon your faces . . . and I will put you out of my presence (2:1-3).

Baptists began, and were until recently, predominantly a lay movement. In this century, however, the complexities of modern life have led to an increasing professionalization of the clergy which, in some ways, has served us well. But as we gradually lost confidence in our ability to engage the secular world,

we not only turned to politicians for help, we also began to focus increasingly on the internal life of our churches. Laity caught up in the hectic pace of urban life, and only dimly aware of our historic polity, began to cede power and authority to the clergy in a move that may yet prove disastrous for our denomination. It is astonishing just how close we have come to replicating the mistakes of post-exilic Israel that left it religiously impotent for centuries. Our only hope may be to give the denomination back to the laity, if they will have it, and restore the role of the minister as pastor rather than power-broker. Let us heed the warning of God speaking through the prophet Zechariah:

. . . the people wander like sheep;
they are afflicted for want of a shepherd.
My anger is hot against the shepherds,
and I will punish the leaders;
for the Lord of hosts cares for his flocks. (10:2-3a)

V. Danger and Diversity

The three hundred year period leading up to the New Testament era is often neglected in studies of this kind because much of its key literature was not included in the Old Testament or its Apocrypha. But this is a crucial chapter in our story, not only because it was a bridge between the Testaments, or because it shaped the context of Jesus' ministry, but because it illustrates the sharply differing responses that religion can make to the threat of extinction. The Hellenistic culture diffused throughout the Mediterranean world by the conquests of Alexander the Great was forced upon Judaism by the Roman Empire, raising the danger that its distinctive way of life would disappear through assimilation into the dominant "One World" community organized around the civil religion of the Caesars. Let us focus on four strategies for survival which received definitive form during this time of acute crisis.

(1) The triumph of the Zadokite priesthood over the Levitical priesthood in the Persian period was short-lived. With the rise of Greece, the pro-Hellenistic Tobiads began to fight with the pro-Zadokite Oniads over the high-priestly office. Then when the Maccabees temporarily repulsed Greek influence, their Hasmonean successors seized the high priesthood for themselves, even though unqualified for this office by heredity. Supporting this religious power play by the Hasmoneans were the aristocratic guardians of the status quo in Jerusalem whom we know as the Sadducees. What this rather sordid story tells us is that if clergy are given too much authority, then those with a vested interest in accommodating the established power structure will try to control them. Ironically, Israel built up a hierarchical priesthood in the post-exilic period to insure the purity of the nation under, local leadership, but this very group ended up as the most corrupted through political infighting and the most compromised through alliances with foreign influences.

(2) Those who built community around Torah more than Temple responded to the successive crises of this turbulent era

with such deep devotion that they became known as pietists, or *Hasidim*. In response to secularizing forces they stressed the perfection and completeness of God's revelation from the beginning of time. This orientation to the past enabled them to achieve great stability, patience, and tolerance in the face of rapid and bewildering change. At the same time, their skilled students of Torah, called scribes, evolved an open-ended, dialogical method of interpretation which balanced fidelity to the Biblical text with adaptability to changing circumstances. Eventually their growing commentary came to be codified as Mishnah and Talmud. It possessed all of the virtues of coherence, consensus, and comprehensiveness, but lacked the spontaneity and unpredictability of the prophetic temperament which was viewed by many as too risky for so troubled a time. Nevertheless, this tradition, which we know as Pharisaism, was the one that survived in post-Biblical Judaism.

(3) Of all the secularizing pressures of these centuries, the most intense came under the Selucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C., an outrage so flagrant that Daniel described it as "the abomination of desolation" (Daniel 12:11). In response, the Maccabees resorted to guerrilla warfare. The New Testament produced a measure of political independence and reawakened hopes for a Davidic messiah. When Rome crushed this effort at self-rule, terrorist groups began to spring up which eventually coalesced into a movement called the Zealots. These were popular insurrectionists who were "zealous" for the nationalistic and theocratic traditions of Israel and willing to express their convictions with a sword. By the time of Jesus, conditions under Rome had become so intolerable that this form of fanaticism gained the upper hand and, within a few decades, produced a revolt that almost destroyed the Jewish community.

(4) A final group called the Essenes is of particular interest, not only because of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, but because its community combined in new forms elements from the other three. Like the Sadducees, the Essenes were deeply committed to the centrality of the Temple; indeed, they may have included Zadokites who fled to a desert commune when Simon Maccabeus usurped the high priesthood in 140 B.C. They totally condemned the current temple cult as hopelessly corrupt and viewed themselves as the "New Temple" that would take its place. Like the Pharisees, they were strict legalists with roots in Hasidic piety who devoted major attention to commenting on the Biblical text. The difference was that at Qumran the Teacher of Righteousness functioned as the sole authoritative interpreter of a highly selective understanding of Scripture. Like the Zealots, they were readying themselves for a Holy War between the Sons of Darkness and the Sons of Light, but they viewed this struggle in apocalyptic categories as a cosmic cataclysm in which the hosts of heaven would fight at their side.

Application: In the present academic climate which champions "multiculturalism," this great diversity of religious movements within Judaism is being interpreted positively as a "rich" expression of pluralism made possible by such virtues as tolerance and freedom. From the tenor of this discussion, one

could easily infer that Baptists would somehow be strengthened if only they permitted and even encouraged a similar multiplicity of alternatives today. The problem with this ideologically-based scenario is that these four rival groups fostered deep antagonisms within Judaism that eventually reduced the community to chaos. Far from creating a lovely flower garden with variegated blooms, they became a jungle of warring factions openly competitive, critical, or even contemptuous of each other. The ability of Baptists to proliferate local church splits, or even whole new denominations, is well known, but it is a misreading of the interbiblical situation to understand its religious movements as examples of an irenic Jewish ecumenism that would support similar fragmentation within Baptist life.

This issue is of great importance for interfaith relations today. Scholars are aggressively condemning widespread “anti-Semitism” which they find in the New Testament and in groups such as Baptists who closely follow the New Testament in proclaiming salvation through Jesus Christ. One would think from following this discussion that Christians have, from the beginning, been guilty of a virulent religious prejudice of which Judaism is wholly innocent. But what is now-called “anti-Semitism” was much stronger *within* first century Judaism than it ever was *between* first century Christians and Jews. For example, there are obvious tensions between Christians and Jews reflected in the Gospel of John, but they do not begin to compare with the outright hatred of Jews for their fellow Jews found in contemporaneous writings from Qumran. Baptists have doubtless been guilty of a measure of anti-Semitism for which we should sincerely repent but, as with our Jewish compatriots in the first century, we have saved our harshest condemnations for our fellow Baptists!

VI: Jesus and His Disciples

Whave just seen how the various religious “parties” in first century Judaism represented competing interpretations of community based primarily on different emphases drawn from the post-exilic heritage of Israel’s storied past. That understanding prepares us to view the ministry of Jesus as yet another way of calling forth the People of God in obedience to their ancestral faith. The validity of this perspective is confirmed by the evidence of the gospels that Jesus was constantly embroiled in controversy with leaders of these alternative groups over the distinctive ways in which he was building community. Therefore, let us look at four of the key underpinnings of his movement and ask how he expressed them in ways that differed strikingly from similar movements in the Judaism of his day.

(1) First and foremost was a new eschatological orientation that rejected all forms of apocalyptic speculation with their scenarios of vindication for friends and vengeance for foes. Instead, in the free prophetic spirit of Isaiah 40-55, Jesus preached that God’s new age of salvation was pressing into human affairs with such disarming nearness that signs of its arrival could already be seen in his ministry. But rather than

coming suddenly and catastrophically from above, God’s kingdom would come gradually and unobtrusively from within, wherever it found faith, which meant that here was an “eschatology-in-process” that had now been inaugurated but not yet consummated. Contrary to the pessimism reflected in Sadducean pragmatism, Pharisaic pietism, Zealot militancy, and Essene belligerence, Jesus dared to believe that the tide had turned, that God was beginning to do a new thing then and there which would permit his people to claim their rightful destiny.

(2) This breathtaking perspective meant that his followers were proleptically set in an eschatological context where the boundless grace of God was already offering forgiveness even to the outcasts of society. As his inaugural sermon on Nazareth indicated, Jesus had come to offer “release to the captives” and “liberty to the oppressed” (Luke 4:18), which would be nothing less than a new exodus of slaves from their house of bondage. This radical openness to “publicans and sinners” shattered the wall of separation by which the Pharisees sought to maintain holiness through rigid observance of Torah. For Jesus, goodness could not be earned by human merit, even his own (Mark 10:18), but was the gift of God’s presence and power. Likewise, heredity was symbolized by circumcision was of no advantage, a key Jewish claim on which Jesus was completely silent. Instead, the decision of faith which he demanded shattered the solidarity of families that shared the same religious legacy (Matthew 10:35-37).

(3) In the most provocative act of his ministry, Jesus condemned the Jerusalem Temple, not in an attempt to support some rival claimant to the priesthood, but because it was not serving as a “house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17). By constructing a series of walls to regulate access to the inner sanctuary, the Jews effectively barricaded Gentiles from God and socially marginalized them in the outermost court used primarily to merchandize sacrificial animals. Prophetic hopes had pictured the Temple in the new age as the center of a worldwide pilgrimage to the mount of God, but Jesus found it to be a bastion of exclusivism controlled by a hierarchical definition of holiness. In symbolically shutting down worship even for an hour, he struck at the heart of that sacerdotalism which had been central to Jewish life since the return from exile.

(4) By insisting that the Temple existed primarily “for all the nations,” Jesus was falsely accused of trying to “destroy” it (Mark 14:58), and this became the indictment that eventuated in his death (Mark 15:29). The radical openness to outsiders which had been a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry from the outset included Samaritans, centurions, and Syro-Phoenicians. Not only did he offer unlimited forgiveness to the despised within Jewish society, such as publicans and sinners, but he dared to teach that loving rather than hating one’s enemies was the most God-like thing that his disciples could do (Matthew 5:43-48). Clearly the universal vision of exilic Isaiah had now been reclaimed, which is why the death which it provoked was understood by Jesus in servant categories (Mark 10:42-45). Refusing to fan the flames of Holy War

being urged by neo-Maccabean zealots at his “triumphal” entry, he decided to take upon himself all of the hostilities festering in the hearts of his countrymen rather than urge them to wreak vengeance on the Romans in what he correctly discerned would be a suicidal conflict.

Application: Baptists have just been through what some consider to be a decisive battle over the Bible, testing in what sense it is the Word of God for the People of God. Unfortunately, some of the code words which became crucial in that debate, such as “inerrancy” and “infallibility” proved impossible to define, but the consensus was that the Southern Baptist Convention ended up with a “high” view of Scripture. One major problem with that outcome is that it ignores the equally important issue of how to interpret this ancient authority. All of the competing groups in Jesus’ day had the highest possible view of Scripture, but that did not prevent them from developing convictions about community that differed drastically from one another and from Jesus. These differences did not root in any lack of devotion to their sacred writings but were based on selecting strategies from various parts of the Bible and giving them different emphases to meet the perceived challenges of that day. In other words, the difference between Jesus and his contemporaries was not so much doctrinal as it was hermeneutical.

Like Jesus, we Baptists can adopt the “realized” eschatology of the Chronicler, the “futuristic” eschatology of Daniel 7-12, or the “incipient” eschatology of Isaiah 40-55. We can emphasize the brokenness of Exodus or the holiness of Ezra. We can major on the universalism of Jonah or the particularism of Nehemiah. We can decide to be the saved remnant of Ezekiel or the saving remnant of the Suffering Servant. In a very literal sense we can be modern Jesus-people, or we can also be, as we often are, modern Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, or Essenes. It is not that some of these communities are “Biblical” while others are “non-Biblical,” for all are based on important aspects of Scripture. Rather, we must decide, as did Jesus, which model responds most effectively to the urgencies of our time. With the dawning of the post-modern era, is this the time to be a community of yesterday or of tomorrow? With every area of public life going global, is this the time to build protective walls or to tear down restrictive barriers? With human efforts at reconciliation underway in Vietnam, Ireland, and South Africa, is this the time to harbor grudges against our enemies or to practice radical forgiveness?

VII. The Early Church

The central question dominating the final era of Biblical history was whether the followers of Jesus would be able to implement their leader’s distinctive vision of what authentic community should be. It is fair to say that, by the end of his life, Jesus was the only person on earth who embodied his deepest convictions regarding eschatological newness, radical forgiveness, universal openness, and vicarious sacrifice. Would the reality of his resurrection do for his disciples what the exodus had done for Israel and enable this community-of-one to

become a worldwide movement? Would the rolling away of the stone be like the parting of the waters by which a new remnant would be delivered from the “house of bondage”? Let us trace the answers to such questions as they unfold in the experience of the early church.

(1) From the outset at Pentecost, Peter left no doubt that for the nucleus of believers a new age had dawned (Acts 2:16-17). The first Christians were essentially a messianic movement within Judaism for whom the messiah had already come in lowliness but would come again in triumph. Already they lived in the power of the promised Holy Spirit but they were still harassed by the power of sin as a retreating foe. It was as if a new order of fulfillment had established a beachhead in the midst of an old order of frustration. Paul existentialized this eschatological polarity by suggesting that Christians were now free from wrath, sin, law, and death even though these threats were well entrenched in the world around them (Romans 5-8). The hopefulness generated by this futuristic orientation was sorely tested by rejection and persecution but never abandoned even when its fruits seemed modest indeed. By living “as though” the form of this world was already passing away (I Corinthians 7:29-31), the early Christians were able to focus their energies on ultimate rather than penultimate concerns.

(2) If the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers was the preeminent sign of the arrival of a new age, the forgiveness of sins even to those who had crucified Jesus was the preeminent sign of its power. For centuries, Judaism had conditioned the conversion of proselytes on circumcision, Temple sacrifice, and Torah observance, but in one generation the first Christians swept aside these religious requirements and offered God’s grace to Jew and Gentile alike solely by faith in Jesus Christ. This radical personalizing of redemption meant that those of every race, nationality, gender, and cultural background were equally welcome to experience, not only the forgiveness of God, but the fellowship of the community. In response to the complaint of scoffers that the intended transformation was not taking place fast enough, the early Christians replied that God was not slow in sending his son either for the first time or the final time; rather, any apparent “delay” was really a sign of God’s patience in giving everyone as much time as possible to repent and be saved (Acts 17:30; Romans 2:4; II Peter 3:9).

(3) The religious apparatus designed to mediate forgiveness had long posed a barrier to those who were not Jews. But almost immediately after the resurrection, Stephen proclaimed that the one centralized Temple in Jerusalem had been a mistake (Acts 7:44-50). Paul took up the theme by designating each early Christian community as a true Sanctuary of God (e.g. I Corinthians 3:16-17; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). But believers were not only the New Temple, they were also its priests (I Peter 2:9), its sacrifice (Romans 12:1), its Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26), and its Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:22). This thoroughgoing spiritualization was designed to open worship to every person without distinction, thereby transcending the walls that made the Jewish cult unable to function as a “house of prayer for all the nations.” The elimi-

nation of Temple, Torah, circumcision, and Sabbath from the center of the Christian faith in less than one generation testifies to the amazing sense of newness, forgiveness, and openness which characterized the movement from its outset.

(4) Even though God's future was becoming present at an incredible pace, the early church still lived in tension between the "now" of a new existence and the "not yet" of a world that had crucified its Lord. During the New Testament era, two great crises tested its willingness to become a servant community in the face of overt hostility. The first was the Jewish War of A.D. 66-73, when Palestinian Christians refused the Zealot option of responding to Roman oppression with a sword. The second was the outbreak of persecution against Gentile Christians under emperors such as Nero and Domitian. Once again the followers of Jesus refused to retaliate, preferring to follow in Christ's steps and "suffer patiently" than to fight a Holy War (I Peter 2:20-21). Soon the threats escalated to martyrdom but the faith held fast and the New Testament ended with an apocalypse that turned Jewish apocalyptic thought upside down. Instead of picturing a warrior God dripping with the blood and gore of Israel's enemies (Isaiah 63:1-6), the Revelation of John describes all the hosts of heaven crying "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive . . . blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" (5:12-13).

Application: Baptists have long sought to embody the essential characteristics of the New Testament church in their corporate life. Now we see that this involves both accepting and rejecting different patterns of community presented to us in Scripture. But which options shall we choose? Christ is the Lord of Scripture and thus his choices are to guide our own. That is exactly the way in which his first followers formed the apostolic church, by building the same kind of community that Jesus had embodied during his ministry on earth. This selectivity does not mean that we pick what we prefer in Scripture and ignore the rest, but rather that we try to fashion a community so compatible with the intention of Jesus that it is worthy to be called "the body of Christ."

How may we describe the core characteristics of such a community? It is one that opts for newness over sameness,

that strives for fulfillment rather than predictability, that faces the magnitude of evil with quiet confidence rather than failure of nerve. It is a community that lives on tiptoe, its nose pressed against the window-pane of the future, God's *avant-garde* in a world of tired traditions and empty routines. It is a community more interested in providing pardon for sinners than protection for saints, a relational arena where grace overcomes not only divine alienation but human estrangement as well. Such a place is safe haven for the vulnerable, the forgotten and oppressed, a place where dignity is restored to the beaten and humility is offered to the proud. Free from political entanglements, it is a community that welcomes those of every nationality and ideology, a body that honors and yet transcends all of our earthly inheritances and affiliations. Where hostilities fester, it forgives enemies and seeks to affirm the essential humanity in every person. In a phrase, it is a company of the Jesus-people, those who give contemporary expression to his mind and heart and spirit. That is the "community" that we as Baptists are called to "nourish" in our day. ■

Endnotes

¹Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

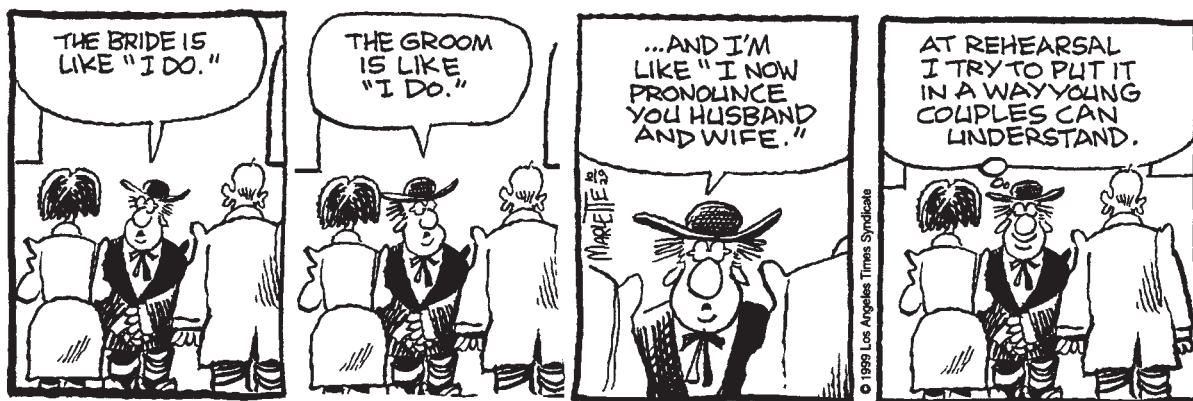
³T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" part II, in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), p. 101.

⁴The Biblical analysis represents a summary and abridgment of Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986). All applications to Baptist life are my own suggestions and fall outside the framework traced by Hanson.

⁵Hanson, p. 66.

⁶Hanson, p. 267.

⁷Hanson, p. 259.



“If It Feels Good, Do It”

By Charles Wellborn

[Dr. Charles Wellborn is Professor of Religion Emeritus, Florida State University and for 20 years was Dean of the Overseas Campus in London.]

Years ago, in an introductory university class in Christian ethics, I asked my students during the first days of class to write a personal response paper answering from their own viewpoints the two most pertinent questions in any ethical discussion: how does one decide the difference between good and bad, and what is the good life?

As one would expect, since a number of the students were from a north Florida conservative Christian background, some gave the expected orthodox answers. One determined what was good or bad according to the Ten Commandments or, in several cases, by answering the question, “What would Jesus do?” Other students presented the fairly common response: what helps people is good; what hurts people is bad.

And there were other answers. Many were superficial, but the paper submitted by one young man attracted my particular attention. Three things were evident: he was not an orthodox Christian, he had given some serious thought to the questions, and he had been exposed at some point to a bit of philosophical thinking. He argued that the difference between good and bad came down to the question of pleasure. The good is pleasurable; the bad is painful. Therefore, the good life is one which produces pleasure and personal satisfaction to a person and avoids pain. He ended with the comment, “I want to live a life I can enjoy. That would be a good life.”

That incident occurred long before the modern pop slogan, “If it feels good, do it” became a catch phrase. But my student’s ideas were a prelude to what has become a widespread phenomenon: the elevation of pleasure to the position of primary arbiter in decisions about human conduct.

Arguing against that moral stance presents some difficulties, at least to many moderns. Is there a sustainable reason why men and women should not do what is pleasurable? Does it make sense for human beings deliberately to submit themselves to pain, or at least to the deprivation of pleasure? My former student was a harbinger of things to come, but he was not an original thinker. In the 4th century BC a minor school of Greek philosophy, called the Cyrenaics, headed by Aristippus, taught that all moral knowledge is unreliable and useless. Therefore, the pursuit of immediate pleasure is the chief purpose of life, and sensual enjoyments are preferable, both to the more complicated and subtle joys of intellectual life and to the rigors of moral restraint. Indeed, one of the disciples of Aristippus, Hegesias, taught that since pleasures are rare at

best, the avoidance of pain should be the main concern of the wise, and that suicide is by far the most efficacious way of avoiding pain—the ultimate philosophy of despair.

I mention the Cyrenaics, not as a kind of academic showoff, but simply to emphasize that there really is “nothing new under the sun.” A Greek contemporary of Aristippus, and a far more respectable philosopher, Epicurus, embraced the same idea of pleasure as the principal aim of life, but sought to refine the idea by arguing that some pleasures are better than others—that intellectual pleasures, for instance, are more desirable than purely physical ones. From him we get the term “epicure,” which the dictionary defines as “a person of refined and fastidious taste.” Thus, for Epicurus, a “good man” was someone who lived for pleasure but was smart enough to know which pleasures were most desirable.

This kind of “feel-good” philosophy did not, however, vanish with the Greeks. In the 19th century, the influential English thinker, Jeremy Bentham, worked out a complicated system which, while still embracing pleasure as the main aim of life, sought to classify all pleasures. Bentham, a mathematician, devised a complex and, finally, impractical scale by which he thought that all pleasures could be measured—evaluating such things as intensity, purity, certainty, and fruitfulness. Bentham, along with John Stuart Mill, his most influential disciple, refined this philosophy into a social one, positing that the “greatest good for the greatest number” was the ultimate aim of all good social policy. Good, of course, means pleasure, and pleasure is then defined as that which is most “useful,” that is, that which produces the most pleasure for the most people. Thus, their philosophy came to be called “utilitarianism,” and that sort of thinking is still with us in the present day.

Of course, the great majority of people today do not pause, while making their moral decisions, to think about philosophy. And exactly at this point arises the prime defect in the approach of high-minded thinkers such as Bentham and Mill. The man of integrity in his cloistered study may take time to weigh out carefully the consequences of his actions, seeking to find “the greatest good for the greatest number,” but the man or woman in the street tends, by and large, to look only at the immediate payoff in terms of pleasure.

That simple observation underlines the principal problem with the utilitarian philosophy. Since “usefulness” actually means “pleasure,” the interpretation of the term comes down to the individual. And here is where the hard-nosed understanding of the Christian faith comes into play. The Biblical Christian must insist on a fundamental understanding of

human nature. To put it simply, in Christian terms, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” This is not an optimistic or happy view of human nature, but it happens to be a realistic one. When the ordinary human being comes to make moral choices, the “man on the Clapham omnibus,” as the British call him—John Doe—makes his decisions on the immediate, personal basis. And those decisions are, almost inevitably, self-centered and short of social responsibility.

The obvious and most-used area of decision here is that of sexual activity. The steadily growing number of illegitimate children, the increasing incidence of abortion, the multitude of people who live together without benefit of any religious or legal ceremony of marriage—all these statistics supply ample evidence. For a huge number of persons in our contemporary society immediate personal sexual pleasure takes precedence over everything else. The social consequences—the “greatest good for the greatest number” play little real part in their decisions. “Pleasure” is the prime factor.

I happen to believe strongly in the right of a woman to control her own body and its reproductive functions, but, I must confess, the increasing incidence of abortion concerns me. If abortion is routinely seen as the “easy” way—though, in actuality, it is far from easy—out of unwanted pregnancy, we open up a Pandora’s box. Abortion, from an objective viewpoint, should never be seen as the escape hatch from sexual irresponsibility; yet that is what it seems to be for many today.

We must not deceive ourselves, however, into thinking that sex is the only moral problem area in our modern society. We live in an entrepreneurial age, and the self-made man, economically speaking, is our hero. To be rich—to “make it” economically—has been established as the ultimate hallmark of success. Our consumer-oriented society encourages us to value economic achievement—sometimes however brought about—as the most admirable of all goals. This means that material prosperity has been equated with the highest pleasure, and the “if it feels good, do it” philosophy reigns supreme.

In an age in which all of us are bombarded with television advertisements—and, indeed, programs—which constantly tell us that happiness consists in what we can buy, is it surprising that the underclass in our society who cannot financially afford all the luxuries they see paraded before them on television decide to steal or loot them? If “pleasure” is the end of all life, and if “pleasure” means the acquisition of goods, then why not use any means to obtain them? Why should others have them, when you do not? The “greasy thumbprint” of human sin leaves its mark here, as everywhere.

Strangely enough, this kind of “feel-good” approach to matters of sexual and economic ethics does not lack its academic defenders. In a lecture last year at the University of Toronto the respected cultural commentator, Michael Ignatieff, argued that radical selfishness was an expression of moral virtue. Human beings, he said, have a prime duty to themselves and a prime right to individual freedom and happiness (pleasure). Ignatieff did not hesitate to face the consequences of his belief. We must, he said, accord respect to an individual’s needs “against the

devouring claims of family life.” It is difficult, if not impossible, to see how Ignatieff’s ideas can possibly jibe with the demands of such thinkers as Bentham and Mill for “the greatest good for the greatest number.”

Ignatieff’s ideas seem terribly naive. When a fifty-year old man, struggling with his second adolescence, leaves his wife and children in cavalier fashion for the charms of a sexy, younger secretary, he has not exemplified legitimate human freedom. He has acted out of base irresponsibility. What he has done is not something that affects only him in the exercise of his freedom, but something which directly affects his wife—another human being, deserving of respect—and his innocent children. Beyond that, he has affected in a real way the society in which he lives, the community of which he is a part. (I do not need to say, I trust, that these words would apply to a woman who did the same sort of thing.)

The crucial fact about the “feel-good” philosophy is that it ignores any sense of an over-arching moral imperative which places limits upon the exercise of personal freedom in the name of community responsibility. Individual freedom is a precious moral right, but freedom without responsibility has no moral basis. To act with no understanding that one’s actions inevitably impinge, at some point, upon the freedom of others is the road to moral anarchy. And with moral anarchy there is no community.

Perhaps no thinker has viewed the human situation with more pessimism than the 17th century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, not himself an orthodox Christian, embraced a view of human nature which carried ultra-Calvinism and its doctrines of original sin and total depravity to their ultimate. Human life, in its natural state, said Hobbes, is a jungle existence. All individuals are depraved, brutish, totally self-centered, and interested only in their own survival and pleasure. Left in that state, all humans would be involved in a continuous war against each other—each seeking his own, victory to the strongest, the devil take the hindmost.

Given that human situation, what is the logical answer? Hobbes had no faith in the power of eternal moral ideals or of the grace of God to alter human beings in their conduct and moral choices. And so he followed his thinking to its logical conclusion. The only hope for human beings is what he called a “social contract,” an agreement into which, for the sake of order and survival in the midst of chaos, human beings enter, entrusting their survival to the absolute rule of a political state, a “Leviathan,” which will ruthlessly enforce order on all its citizens.

The shape of that order will depend totally on the will of the rulers in power, and, since those rulers are themselves, like their subjects, corrupted human beings, that order may well be tyranny of the worst order. Hobbes hoped for beneficent rulers, but the history of the 20th century has taught us that, in the name of order, dictatorial rulers like Hitler and Stalin may seek to impose the most diabolical kind of structure upon their people, all in the name of “the greatest good for the greatest number.”

To move from the “feel good” idea to the extremes of

Nazism and Communism may seem like a huge jump, but the logic is inexorable. Unless there is some limit upon the ideal of individualistic pleasure as a moral principle, the door is open for almost unimaginable consequences—which we have seen worked out in terrible detail in our own century.

Even in a democratic society like our own, still guided to some extent by a sense of moral imperative, the dangers are fully apparent. True, those less powerful elements in our society, whether they be economic, ethnic, or social, rightly feel that they have no alternative except to organize themselves into power blocs of their own, more nearly equipped to oppose discrimination and oppression. Yet, if these new power groups are concerned only with their own welfare—their own “pleasure,” with no real regard for the rights of others, the result can only be a continuation of injustice. The political, social, economic, or racial structure may be turned upside down, but one oppressive group will only have been substituted for another.

The “feel-good” ethic is finally and inevitably self-defeating. The individual who lives only for his own pleasure will eventually face the situation in which his “pleasure” is opposed by another individual or group with more power, and the individual’s pleasure will be replaced with misery. When power becomes the only ingredient in the social process, the weak must inevitably suffer.

I want to close this article by presenting an idea that deserves considerably more attention than I can give it here. If, as Epicurus, Bentham, Mill, Hobbes, and others have believed, pleasure is the prime motivation of all human beings, then there is a way to apply this philosophy to the Christian life. The word “joy” occurs in the Scriptures innumerable times. When Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, that “the peacemakers, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger after righteousness” are blessed, I do not think he meant that their reward would come only in the after-life. “Blessed” can be translated as “joyful,” and I believe that there is joy or “pleasure” for the earnest Christian believer in this life, as well as in the life beyond. I have often heard the Christian life preached as if it were inevitably full only of suffering, pain, and self-denial. I reject that picture. True, there can come pain and, certainly, self-denial, if one seeks to live the Christian life. But there is infinitely more. I know, from personal experience, that there is joy—pleasure—in believing that one is striving to do the will of God. I know that there is a joy that comes from expanding one’s moral horizons beyond animalistic self-interest to a concern for the neighbor. To love God, and to love one’s neighbor, is not a trial but a blessing. And the joy—the pleasure—that comes from that new focus of life and activity is something that cannot be measured on Bentham’s calculus.

For the Christian, who properly understands his faith, the axiom, “If it feels good, do it,” can be a helpful guide to moral decision. ■

Of She Bears and Y2K

(continued from page 2)

“the Father of lights (James 1:17). In the very beginning, as it is recorded in Genesis 1:3, God said, “Let there be light; and there was light.” Joseph Haydn, on hearing the first public performance of “The Creation,” leaped from his seat at the great choral refrain “and there was light” and cried out, “I didn’t write that. God did.” So, God’s people, as “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8), ordained to be “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), are to “walk in the light as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7).

God is Truth (1 John 5:6). Pilate’s question to Paul, “What is truth?” might rightly have been posed as “Who is truth?” for we believe not only that truth is of God, but that indeed God is truth. To say that the truth makes us free is to say that God makes us free. Like our Lord, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), Christians are to gird our loins with truth (Ephesians 6:14) and “provide things honest in the sight of all” (Romans 12:17).

God is Love (1 John 4:8, 16). This formulation identifying God with the self-giving, compassionate, outreaching, tender mercy which we call love is a wonderful way to say who God is. And the other side of the coin of love is justice for justice is love at a distance. God’s people are ordained to love him with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28).

God is Word (John 1:1). Genesis starts with, “In the beginning God” and the Gospel of John opens with “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” A word is reason and reality expressed in a language that folks can understand. What an astounding and beautiful insight with which to consummate this “licking.” And what a wonderful thought it is to carry with us through this Christmas season and into the new millennium.

As the morning stars sing again together and as all the children of God shout for joy (Job 38:7) in his grace, I hope we can join our lives in glorifying God and in accelerating our everlasting vocation of enjoying him forever.

Hey. The bird is on the wing. Put your machine in fast forward. Now is the time. This is the day. ■

Feminism Goes to Seed

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

[Rebecca Merrill Groothuis is the author of *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Baker Books, 1997) and *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Wipf and Stock, 1997). Her web page is: www.gospel-com.net/ivpress/groothuis.]

Modern feminism, which has always left a great deal to be desired, had at least one legitimate concept at its inception in the 1960s and 1970s, namely, the notion that women, as well as men, should have the opportunity to aspire to be all that they can be; it should not be assumed that the fixed essence of femaleness is being in the service of a man. But note that at the root of this eminently reasonable claim is the quintessentially feminist beef that women have always ended up with a mere sliver of the pie of cultural power. Aha! says the antifeminist, all this talk of women using their talents to the full for the general good is a mere rhetorical cover for their real agenda of gaining the upper hand over men—upsetting the balance of power in society at large and in personal relationships. This prospect, of course, terrifies the average man.

Behind the scenes here, manipulating many of these views and concerns like puppets on strings, is the primitive power of the female body over the male. Women and men have always been aware of this sometimes unsavory fact of life. What changes across cultures and history is the use to which this fact of life is put. In times past, when men felt obligated to restrain themselves for the sake of moral virtue and/or social order, those men who found this to be a formidable project (that is to say, most men) fell back on the venerable solution of culturally subjugating women; men evidently figured that if they had power over women, women would not have power over them.

But no matter. Women have always adapted to this arrangement by wielding their sexual power over men in covert, manipulative ways in order to get men to do what they want men to do for them. Women's submission is often marketed in conservative religious circles as useful for just this purpose: make him feel like he's the big, strong man in charge and he'll do anything for you. Feminine wiles in Christian guise.

The essence of feminism is a rejection of this age-old arrangement and an affirmation of women's right to exercise power directly. One feminism differs from another in terms of what sort of power women exercise in what way, and to what purpose. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, feminist women wanted to exercise political power by voting, as men do. In the 1960s and 1970s, they wanted to exercise personal

power by pursuing the vocation of their choice, as men do. Much of feminism today—in apparent capitulation to the pornographic American culture of the last decade—has devolved into the simple, sordid matter of women freely flaunting their sexual power over men. In our sexually careless society, little impetus remains—on the part of either men or women—to control or contain the power of female sexuality.

This is feminism at its worst: the power of “the second sex” reduced to the power of sex. It is as antifeminist as it can get and still be reckoned feminist. It is antifeminist in that—as in all traditional cultures—women are being defined as sexual beings, and men as human beings. It is feminist in that women are ostensibly doing what they want to do (overtly exercising their sexual power), not what they must do in order to accommodate and negotiate the constraints of a male power structure (standard procedure for women in prefeminist or antifeminist cultures). Such a “feminism,” however, easily boils down to women using their sexual power in order to gain some secondary access to the cultural power society normally reserved for men. It is a “feminism” that serves well the fundamental agenda of that unconquerable deity, the male ego.

Until recently in modern American society, there have been two categories of women outside that of the full-time homemaker: the professional career woman and the bimbo, the sex siren. Those two categories, previously assumed to be mutually exclusive, have now merged to form the new feminist ideal: the bimbo career woman, with emphasis on the bimbo. The significance of the career is seen primarily in terms of the opportunities it provides for a woman to have a high-powered sex life, without being financially dependent on her sex partner(s). The popular media are replete with such preposterous heroines, from Ally McBeal (unreal TV character) to Monica Lewinsky (surreal real-life character).

This is feminism gone to seed—along with the rest of our culturally exhausted postmodern society. The reasoning is: “Nothing means anything anymore. All that remains is recycled silliness. So just enjoy asserting your power—sexual power, that is, the only power women get to have. And don't hesitate to use it as a weapon if that's what makes you feel personally empowered.”

But the power of postfeminism is fallacious. Women who seek to exercise power by flaunting their sexual power—whether in actual promiscuity or merely in clothing themselves immodestly—end up losing power, the power that comes from possessing personal integrity and winning the respect of both women and men. ■

When Life Becomes More Than a Body Can Bear

By Al Staggs

[Dr. Al Staggs is a performing artist specializing in historical monologues about Bonhoeffer, Rauschenbusch, and Clarence Jordan. He lives now in Hurst, Texas.]

Shortly after relocating to Ft. Worth, one of the neighbors came over to our house to introduce himself. I had previously noticed this young man with his two preschool children. In the few times I had seen them together, there was never any sign of a wife and mother. My neighbor introduced himself and explained to me that his wife had taken her life just a few months back. He told me that she had only been diagnosed with depression for just one month prior to her suicide. He said that she had been taking Prozac since her initial visit to her doctor just weeks before she died. This young widower and single parent explained to me that he and his two children were in counseling. He talked to me about his relationship with his church and how his faith had helped him during this crisis. As he turned to walk back to his house, he said, "You know, God doesn't put on us more than we can bear." It was only weeks later that I began to think seriously about that statement. What about his wife? She must have been convinced in her own mind that she had more than she could possibly bear.

My mother took her life on March 4, 1978, following months of psychotherapy and drug therapy. She had been hospitalized at the Arkansas State Hospital following a number of unsuccessful attempts at taking her own life. She seemed resolute about ending what to her seemed an awful and dismal existence. The faith that had been her foundation through an abusive marriage of nearly fifty years was in those dark days nowhere to be found. The faith that was so evident to her five children during our early years was nonexistent for her then in her greatest time of need. On one of my last visits with her in the hospital she said, "Alfred, I'm not sure I'm really saved." My response was, "Mom, if you're not saved, then none of us are." Despite all of my attempts at reassurance, despite all of the love showered on her by all her children, and in the face of all that medical science could do with drugs, psychotherapy, and shock therapy, Mom gave up on life on a cold, cloudy, drizzly March day in Arkansas.

Life has a way of changing our theology. I know that my mother's suicide caused the beginning of a massive readjustment of my own personal working theology. Here, the finest Christian I had ever known was left helpless in the pit of life. Her spirit was defeated by the clouds of depression. Life had become more than she could bear.

Mother's tragic death forced me to reconsider some of my

faith presuppositions. One of those presuppositions was that if we are dedicated Christians we will likely not ever be in a situation where we will feel emotionally and spiritually powerless, helpless, and hopeless. If we are committed, dedicated Christians we will never find ourselves in a context where we will feel all options are closed to us. Mother's exemplary Christian life and tragic death shouted a resounding, "Not true" to this assumption.

Days following her death I discovered that the concept of the Cross had new meaning for me. This symbol which had been up to that time a "religious" symbol of something that occurred long ago, suddenly began to take on a present tense, existential meaning. This symbol that had before represented a shield from defeat and illness and the promise of triumph and success in life, now came to mean understanding and Divine presence in my personal despair at the loss of my mother. I heard in a new way what Jesus said from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" At that moment Jesus felt forsaken as my mother had felt forsaken and as I now felt forsaken. Jurgen Moltmann spoke of this concept in his book, *The Crucified God*. Moltmann, who was conscripted as a very young man into the German army in World War II, found himself as a Prisoner of War in the hands of the British army at the end of that war. It was in this hopeless, helpless condition that he began to understand that the Cross was in a very real sense a defeat, a tragedy, and not just a theological concept. Liberationist Theology coined the phrase, "The view from below", that is, the place of powerlessness and suffering and even death.

I believe my mother felt guilty for feeling hopeless. That's why she could continue to feel that she had let God down by her despair. That's why she could say to me in her last phone conversation, "Son, you wouldn't be proud of me, for what I've done." In her despair she had tried to kill herself on several occasions by hanging. My mother felt that God expected her to always be good and positive and not ever give in to thoughts of despair.

In rereading my Bible following mother's death, I rediscovered the anguish and despair of the psalmist and the prophets. The spiritual and emotional hells of Job, Jonah, and Jeremiah were particularly meaningful and comforting. These were real emotions expressed as a result of real tragedies. This was no magical, sugar-coated spiritual pill that inoculated one from all that life brings. These emotions were cries of anguish and even protest that God had left them without hope and without help. These prophets were having

to endure more than they could bear.

Another assumption that changed as a result of mother's suicide was the assumption that God can't deal with our honest emotions and our anger, even our anger at God. The protests and cries of the prophets and the psalmist certainly carried anger at God. It does seem that the Jewish faith gives more credence to this notion of "wrestling with God", this idea of "contending with God." I recall that my brother, Tom, exclaimed in his grief about mother, "You made a mistake this time, God." A shocking statement, yes. Also an honest emotion and even a prayer.

I appreciate particularly the position of the author and Holocaust survivor, Eli Wiesel, in his contention that we both worship God and continue to question God. Wiesel cannot understand why God did not intervene during the murder of six million Jews including one and a half million children. He says that to become an atheist is not a possibility, that we can't let God off that easily. Carlyle Marney was noted for saying, "God has a lot for which to give an accounting."

This idea of expressing anger at God was a totally foreign idea, an unthinkable notion, when I was growing up in the Baptist church in Arkansas. One felt that to express strong negative emotions toward God would mean to risk being struck dead. Yet any healthy, loving, long-term and committed relationship includes the exchange of negative feelings as well as positive ones. I prefer to think of God as a loving parent who is not put off by my anger and that this parent can and does love me in spite of my hostility. These are normal dynamics of relationships at their authentic level.

I still believe my mother had a total breakdown in her

brain chemistry, a reversal that would render her powerless to make rational decisions. I don't believe she was responsible for her actions due to this betrayal of her body chemistry's fragile balance. Her putting a pistol to her head in the midst of a mental hell can hardly be called the exercise of one's free will. The idea that all humanity's problems are called by the misuse of our free will is a gross oversimplification. On the contrary, I am prone to want to ask God how we humans can be held responsible when our minds betray us.

In the wake of the terrible shooting tragedy at Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, reports have surfaced that the shooter, Larry Gene Ashbrook, was under a doctor's care and taking Prozac for paranoid-schizophrenia. If Mr. Ashbrook was suffering from this terrible disease and had failed to maintain his dosage intake, we may be able to determine that he was acting on a delusion or a series of delusions precipitated by his illness. Certainly any explanation offered for this man's horrific actions do not lessen the sense of profound grief and loss that all of the victims' families continue to feel. Yet saying that this was the work of Satan or that it was simply a misuse of a man's "free will" does not do justice to the mystery of our incredibly complex human minds.

Life does seem to hammer some people in merciless ways. Sometimes the only appropriate response is fully to feel our grief and pain without having to endure a misguided guilt for being fully human. In those hours and days of helplessness, we should feel the freedom to express our honest feelings with God, instead of having to contrive a posture of false piety and positive emotions. There is a measure of comfort in the most difficult of times when we remember that we are loved by the Lord wherever we are and however we feel. ■



A Hal Haralson Trilogy

By Hal Haralson

Law School at Thirty-three

My friend looked at me and asked, "What would you do if you could do anything you wanted to do. . . money is no object?" I was thirty-three years old, married with children ages 1, 5, and 10. "I'd go to law school." "How much would you and Judy need a month?" This was August, 1968. We could probably get by on \$750.00 per month." "How about a thousand?" "Okay . . . let's make it a thousand." Within two hours we had worked out a contract whereby he and his partner bought my interest in the business, paying me \$1,000.00 per month for thirty-six months.

Monday morning (the third week of August) I was looking at the sign on the door of Dean T. J. Gibson at the University of Texas School of Law. "Do not knock . . . come in."

I introduced myself to the man who was always there for students. He looked like he had slept in the clothes he wore. He always looked that way.

I introduced myself and told him I wanted to go to law school.

"When do you want to start?"

"When does school start?"

"Two weeks. When did you file your application?"

"I haven't filed an application. I only found out two days ago I was going."

"What did you make on the LSAT?," Dean Gibson asked.

"What's the LSAT?," I replied.

The Dean looked at me and shook his head from side to side.

"Look Dean, I'm thirty-three years old and married with three children. I've been out of college over ten years. I had a 3.6 grade point average while holding down three jobs. I've got enough money to do this over the next thirty six months. If I'm going to do it, it's got to be now."

"Okay, I'll tell you what I want. You write me a letter. Put what you have told me in that letter. I'll present it to the admissions committee on Thursday. I'll call you on Friday."

The call came. "You're admitted. You have to pass the LSAT in November."

I was on the admissions committee during my third year of law school. I found that between 1960 and 1970 there were three times as many applicants as there were openings at U.T. Law School . . . except the Fall of 1968. The Viet Nam War had taken so many under-graduates that there were still openings when school began.

There are times when the presence of God is felt in events

that cannot be explained as coincidence.

This was one of those times.

Searching for Judy Christian

It was the Summer of 1955. There weren't many summer jobs in Loraine, Texas (population 700.) My brother Dale and I needed to make some money to pay our tuition at Hardin-Simmons University in the fall. Dale would be a freshman and I would be a junior. Dale was studying to be a lawyer. I was studying for the ministry.

Our Uncle Dell had forty acres south of town with an irrigation well on it. We talked him into letting us farm it on the "halves", i.e. he got half of what we made. We moved in and began moving the water.

The shack we spent the summer in was made of concrete blocks. It had no windows, no door, and no floor. There was no plumbing. We moved the irrigation pipes at 8:00 p.m., 2:00 a.m.

and 10:00 a.m. The ground was always wet so we bogged through the mud and fought mosquitoes. Since we had no light, the 2:00 a.m. move was the most difficult.

It was a long, hot summer. But the cotton grew and we knew we would make money for college.

Sometime during August, a friend of ours named Lanny Curry came by to see us. Lanny worked as a recruiter for Hardin Simmons University and spent the summer calling on prospective students. He told us he had been in Littlefield, Texas, where he went out to the municipal pool and met the lifeguard who was to be a freshman at HS-U that fall. Lanny's description of Judy

Christian in her bathing suit captured the attention of both the Haralson boys.

"You guys want to be on the lookout for Judy Christian when you get to school. She is really a beauty."

Neither of us said much about the conversation with Lanny. We were both planning our strategies to be the first to find Judy. Dale found her the first day and had a date with her that night. . . and the next night . . . and the next night. She was 5'2", very blond, with an enormous smile and contagious enthusiasm. I really fell for Judy, but there was nothing I could do since she was going out several nights a week with my brother. Judy and I became close friends, but it could go no further.

The Thanksgiving holiday was upon us and Dale and I headed toward Loraine in our old green 1952 Plymouth. The conversation turned to Judy and Dale complained about all

the money he had spent on her over the past three months without getting his first kiss. He was obviously not very pleased with this situation.

"That's not a very good return on your investment," I replied. I encouraged this line of thinking and on the way back to the campus, Dale decided he was going to date some other girls and gave me permission to go out with Judy. I was so excited I could hardly contain myself and told Dale to be sure because if I ever started dating Judy, she would be his sister-in-law. That may have been somewhat presumptuous on my part. Dale said go ahead.

Go ahead I did. I had my first date the first week of December and another the second week of December. I was invited to go to Littlefield (45 miles north of Lubbock) the day after Christmas. On December 27, 1955, I proposed . . . Judy accepted and we were married on December 27, 1956. Now, we celebrate that date 43 years later.

Judy laughs and says God called her to be a preacher's wife and Dale was going to be a lawyer. She knew she could never be married to a lawyer.

Someone said, "You want to make God laugh? Tell Him your plans."

Depending on who is telling the story, it comes out like so:

Judy: "I dated both the Haralson boys and picked the best one."

Dale: "I dated Judy and decided I could do better, so I let Hal have her."

Hal: "I took Judy away from my brother."

It's 43 years later and my search for Judy Christian became the beginning of that many years of marriage. She and Dale have been friends all these years. We all chuckle when we recall her saying, "I could never be married to a lawyer."

A Grease Rack Prayer

I pulled into the Texaco station on Fredericksburg road at Wonderland Shopping Center in San Antonio.

I was in a hurry.

My father had called from Abilene to tell me he had a listing on a 7,000 acre farm in the valley. He wanted me to help him find a buyer.

Since I was selling farms and ranches for the Guy Chipman Company (a San Antonio real estate firm), this was exciting.

This sale would involve millions of dollars and I'd get a share of it.

As I filled my car with gas, the owner came out to talk.

I had traded at Hal Taylor's Texaco for some time and knew Hal well. He was a burly ex-marine, with tatoos of hula girls on his arms.

His language was sprinkled with profanity. He was comfortable around me even though I had approached him several times about his relationship to God.

"Never had time for that God stuff. My wife and kids go, but it's not for me."

I had invited him to go with us to Trinity Baptist church and hear Buckner Fanning, also, an ex-marine. Hal was impressed with the idea of an ex-marine preacher, but always put me off.

"Where you headed? You seem to be in a hurry."

I told Hal about the farm near Harlingen.

"That sounds great. I hope it works out for you. Could I talk to you for a minute?"

I started to say I'll get with you when I return from the valley, but something about the tone of his voice made me feel I should listen.

We went over to the grease rack. Hal seemed to want privacy.

Hal blurted out, "You know what you told me the other day, about God loving me and wanting me to be his child?"

"I don't understand how God could love me with my drinking, bad language, and besides, I never go to church."

"Hal, this acceptance of God's love doesn't depend on what kind of man you are. It depends on your willingness to invite Jesus Christ to come into your life and give your life to him."

"You see, Jesus Christ died to pay for your sins. You have to believe that and trust yourself to him."

"Okay," Hal replied, "I've been thinking about this a lot the last few days. How do I do it?"

"All right, Hal, you pray after me."

"Dear God, I know I'm a sinner. I believe Christ died for my sins. I believe you love me. I know I can't change my life - I tried that. Please come into my life, forgive my sin, and accept me as one of your children."

There were tears in Hal Taylor's eyes when I looked up. The big ex-marine, in a very uncharacteristic move, gave me a bear hug and thanked me.

We bowed again and thanked God for Hal Taylor's new life.

"Gotta go, Hal. I'll talk with you when I get back. I want to introduce you to Buckner. You ex-marines will like each other.

Things moved quickly in the Valley (Harlingen). My father and I operated out of our motel room and were talking millions of dollars and showing the ranch to prospective buyers.

A phone call from Judy brought all this to a screeching halt.

There was a robbery at Hal Taylor's station. He was shot in the head and was in a coma. He was not expected to live.

I returned to Austin in three days and went to the hospital where I met Hal's wife. I told her about the prayer at the grease rack.

"Could you come to my home and tell Hal's mother and father and our children about the grease rack prayer?"

"Of course," I replied and a time was set.

Hal's father was an elderly man, a cab driver from Kerrville. When I recounted my conversation with Hal, he stated, "That's the answer to 40 years of prayer."

Hal never came out of the coma. The family asked me to assist Buckner Fanning with the funeral and I told this story. Then, and now, Hal Taylor in life and in death shares his faith in God.

I'm thankful I wasn't in too big a hurry to listen to Hal by the grease rack.

The Grandeur of God and the Love of Literature

By Ralph Wood

[Dr. Ralph Wood is University Professor at Baylor University. He delivered this address to New Faculty Seminar people at the beginning of the current school year.]

Rather than offering a large set of theoretical claims that might prove soporific so early in the morning, I thought it might be instructive to praise the particular teacher who engendered in me a lifelong love of literature. His name is Paul Barrus, and he is still very much alive even if not very well, in this his 98th year toward Paradise—as Dante described the Christian life. I owe him a debt too great to be paid, but at least I can offer this small tribute of praise and thanksgiving, in the hope that we too might shape the lives of our students as deeply as he did mine.

I.

Let me make clear that Paul Banus was above all an extraordinarily able scholar and teacher. Here my accolades are strictly secular: they could be made of any great academic. Excellence is excellence, wherever it is found, and there is no need to baptize it as covertly Christian. An atheist could possess these same traits of academic integrity and rigor. Barrus possessed them abundantly. Though he was a master of languages (speaking both French and German while reading Latin as well), his chief love was literature. One of its chief functions, he said, is “to lift life to the level of consciousness, to deliver us from our self-enchancement, to free us from our hallucinations of permanence.”

Paul Barrus did not suggest that literature could proffer so great a gift as salvation. He was no aesthete of the imagination. Yet his teaching revealed that the great novelists and poets offer parables and metaphors of our redemption. They can liberate us from our bovine obliviousness, freeing us for a life of moral and spiritual discernment. Most of us remain mired, as Thoreau so memorably said, in “lives of quiet desperation.” We academics must not think of the morally and spiritually unconscious primarily as those folks who do not read books or possess college degrees. Millions of Americans are spiritually inert because they have been educated in mere technical proficiency. A recent Baylor graduate illustrates my point. This alumna confessed to me that she had acquired huge amounts of data and many professional skills during her four years here, but that she had done no serious thinking at all. She was never made to encounter the large religious and philosophical questions about the meaning and purpose of life, about the reality of God in his own radical act of self-disclosure, about the problem of evil and suffering. Thus did she give her grim

assent to Walker Percy’s claim that the wrong kind of learning can be a dangerous thing. “You can make all As,” Percy said, “and still flunk life.”

Paul Barrus helped me wrangle with the eternal queries because he was an excellent classroom teacher, not because he was a published scholar. He did not have “world enough and time” to do academic research and writing. During those days, a five-course teaching load (and at least one summer term) was the norm. Yet it must also be confessed that Barrus did not find this regimen a burden. He loved to teach, and he loved to teach literature more than to write essays about it. Given the choice between reading *Anna Karenina* and cranking out yet another article, he knew where the true priority lay. He also knew how often scholarship is made to serve ideological purposes that grind the professor’s own political axe. It is a noteworthy fact that Paul Barrus’ students never had an inkling about his political propensities. This is all the more remarkable when we recall that the 1960s were a politically turbulent time. We lived near to the killing of John Kennedy in nearby Dallas, yet were not far from the war in faraway Vietnam, whose veterans were returning with reports of horror. The atmosphere was also charged with racial controversy. The federal courts had mandated the integration of public schools and universities, and yet our college president had vowed never to admit black students. That Paul Barrus never voiced his opinions about these matters is not to say that his teaching was non-political. It is rather to say that he taught a politics of a considerably higher order than the current crisis could touch. The high quality of his teaching made a far more powerful political commentary on controversial matters than any strident pontifications could have accomplished. His sterling integrity of mind and his deep generosity of heart made a devastating critique of an unjustifiable war, of political hatred, of racial bigotry.

Barrus was master teacher, not because he had learned clever techniques or effective methods of instruction, but because he had mastered his subject the chief imaginative writers of 19th century America: Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville, Dickinson and Twain. Barrus taught them with energy and enthusiasm, and he expected his students to meet him on the same terms—to be prepared and attentive and involved. He despised pretense and puffery in all its forms. The single motto that he wished to affix to his doorposts, he wittily confessed, was this one: “Be specific.” The pretentious and the concrete don’t easily mix. Literature draws its lifeblood from metaphors and analogies, from characters and plots, not from disembodied abstractions. Barrus approached literature in the same way that Dr. Johnson’s blind

housekeeper poured tea: she kept her finger inside the cup. His teaching of the great texts of American and European literature was enlivened with soul-scalding illustrations and telling comparisons.

Barrus was so popular a teacher that his sections of American literature filled quickly every term. Yet he never cultivated a student audience. He did not “hang out” with us, nor did we drop by his office for idle chat. He maintained a healthy professorial distance that commanded our respect. Yet we knew unmistakably that he was our friend, and we went to him for counsel. When my college roommate committed suicide during his first year of medical studies, I went straight to Paul Barnes’ office for consolation and instruction. Barrus also made periodic book purges to lighten his heavy-laden shelves, and he would invite his students to treat themselves to works he no longer needed. Many of these books were excellent works in Catholic culture that became mainstays in my own burgeoning library.

Paul Barrus was not only an excellent scholar and teacher of literature. He was also one of the deepest Christians on our campus. His life in the classroom was decisively shaped by his faith. His religion was not a dusty hobby that he pursued in his pastime: it was the core and center of his being, and thus of his teaching. What made Barrus’ Christianity so singular is that he was the single practicing Catholic on an otherwise Protestant faculty and on an almost entirely Protestant campus. I had heard rumors of Barrus’ Catholicism long before I took his classes. They had prompted in me the fear that, as an agent of the scarlet harlot of Rome, he could not be a serious Christian. My home county in eastern Texas contained not a single Catholic church. Having never met a Catholic prior to my arrival at college, I shared the conventional Protestant bigotry about Catholics. What a huge irony awaited me! In this Catholic I would find a lifelong friend and spiritual companion who would shape me more decisively than any of my other teachers.

Though I had wanted to study at Baylor, I can now see the providential mercy inherent in my attending East Texas State and thus of getting to study with a Catholic professor. I found that Paul Barrus’ faith resonated deeply with my own. He was devoted to the same Lord, to the same salvation uniquely accomplished in him, to the same evangelical desire to declare this Good News to all people. Under Barrus’ tutelage, I became deeply sympathetic to Catholic Christianity. As I explained to President Sloan when I joined the Baylor faculty, my work is ecumenical to the core. It is premised on the conviction that we Baptists and other Protestants constitute a reform movement within the church catholic (note the lower case), and that we have our right to exist only as we make our unique contribution to the Faith universal.

I learned from Barrus that ecumenical vision did not mean bland religious tolerance, much less apathetic indifference. Though a cradle Catholic by virtue of his Irish-American upbringing in Iowa, he was also a Catholic by conviction. What Flannery O’Connor confessed of herself was also true of him: “I am a Catholic not as someone else would be a Baptist

or a Methodist,” she once said, “but as someone else would be an atheist.” While we didn’t know Barrus’ politics, we knew that he went to weekly Mass at the tiny Catholic church in Commerce, and that he appeared in class every spring with a strange cruciform smudge on his forehead. Most of us would soon learn that Lent did not refer, as we had thought, to the stuff that stuck to our socks.

Barrus’ religion was not an individual and subjective business. To be a Christian, I learned from him, meant much more than “having a private relationship with Jesus”—walking and talking in the garden alone, being told that we are his own. Being Christian meant an open and unabashed identification with the Body of Christ, with his people called the Church. In Paul Barrus I encountered, for the first time, a Christianity that centered upon three inseparable things: liturgical worship, ethical practices, and doctrinal beliefs. It was no private affair of the lonely believer before a solitary God: it was a drastic communal and public reality. I was later to learn that Paul Barrus had consecrated himself to a life of celibacy. You can imagine the shock that we hormonally-charged adolescents experienced upon learning that someone would give up sex for the Kingdom of God. As a young man, Barrus had been summoned to the priesthood. But as was the custom in those far more demanding days, a needy grandparent had been assigned to his care. Having to earn a living not only for himself but also for her, he became a teacher. Yet Providence was still at work, as Barrus was finally able to follow his first calling half a century later. After retiring from college teaching as a man well into his 70s, he was at last priested.

Looking back upon these events with the hindsight of forty years, I can now see that Paul Barrus was helping me confront the fact that to be Christian is often to be counter-cultural. To make witness to the Gospel is, inevitably, to go against the grain of the world. This was a hard lesson for a boy who had been brought up in the South, where Protestant Christianity is the culture religion of the region and where, as it is sometimes said, there are almost more Baptists than people. Here I was confronting a teacher who revealed, ever so quietly, that being Christian requires us to be both radical and eccentric: it requires us to have roots as deep as the Cross and to have a Center other than the world’s other centripetal and centrifugal points.

Paul Barrus made it evident, in a state-college classroom where true pluralism could prevail in the early 60s, that Christian faith is not one human possibility among others. It is not merely our western way of being religious. It is, instead, the unique provision that God has made, in the Jews and Jesus Christ, for the whole world’s salvation. It is what eye has not seen, what ear has not heard, what mind has not thought, what heart has not felt, what spirit has not imagined. It was what St. Paul calls simply “the Gospel of God.” Little did I know that Barrus was having an indelible effect on my vocabulary. Quite unwittingly, he was excising the word “moderate” from my speech. Though it remains a term of political praise, I discovered that “moderation” is usually a religious vice. That Christians would describe themselves as “moderates” rather

than as radicals or eccentrics has remained a huge conundrum to me. It is exceeding strange that Baptists, or Christians of any other sort, could deliberately embrace the adjective that describes the church of Laodicea—the church whose lukewarm moderation makes God promise to vomit it out of his mouth. St. Thomas Aquinas, I would later learn, declared that sin is often the result of excess, of taking good things to extremes. In one matter alone, said Thomas, there can be no excess: there is no excess in the love of God. To love God moderately is indeed an obscenity.

II.

There were two kinds of truth that, as lovers of literature, Paul Barrus and my other English teachers made me confront. The negative lesson they taught me is that, for Christian faith to be worthy of the name, it has to confront the harsh truths that count against it. The skepticism that we encounter in great literary texts is ever so salubrious and chastening for the life of faith. Their doubts can serve to make our faith real. The great canonical texts, as Harold Bloom has argued, permanently re-arrange the furniture of our lives. They serve to remind us of all those tragic realities and harsh truths that an easy belief is prone to ignore. This explains why Barrus could teach non-Christian—even anti-Christian—texts sympathetically. He understood that the Gospel can stand its own ground and does not need our desperate defense. Once when I asked why he had written a doctoral dissertation on Ralph Waldo Emerson, that notorious denier of Trinitarian faith, he replied without hesitation, “To become a better Christian.”

Emerson, Barrus taught us, challenges our conventional notions of God and man and the world. So does every eminent writer. We cannot read Sophocles or Shakespeare and still believe that we are self-made men and women who determine our own destiny by our own wisdom and effort. There are painful limits to human existence, the great writers teach us, things that we cannot know until it is too late, forces and circumstances that shape us quite apart from our own wills. And we are undone by our virtues, they remind us, even more than our vices. These are lessons worth learning in their own right and in any age, but especially important for our own time. Ours is an age when secularists and Christians alike are likely to forget that there are evils which cannot be fixed but only endured. Rather than making non-Christian writers into either anonymous believers or worthless heretics, Barrus taught me that we ought to revere them as the masters of suspicion who give the lie to all saccharine piety.

From Melville I learned something far darker than Darwin ever taught—namely, that nature is not only random and accidental, but perhaps also malevolent, bursting forth from its depths with leg-amputating and ship-scuttling fury. Never again, after reading Melville, could I view calamities such as cancer and hurricanes simply as the direct will of the good God. Melville gave me dark but healthy doubts, for faith without doubt is dead—to rephrase the Letter of James. Yet I suspect it was Thoreau and Emerson who offered the most serious corrective to my naïve Christianity. They both

belonged to the tribe that William James called “the once born”—those who have no apparent need for the transcendent and redeeming God of the Gospel. Asked whether he had made his peace with God, the dying Thoreau replied that he was unaware of any quarrel. Emerson virtually canonized Thoreau for remaining the perfect “bachelor of Nature and thought,” claiming that he “never had a vice in his life.” My Catholic teacher didn’t offer a hostile reading of these great pagan writers as damnable apostates. Instead, he gave a deeply sympathetic account of their work, finding in them a chastening corrective to all Christian presumption. Yet I also notice this caveat written in the margin of my old textbook: “Thoreau and Emerson believe in the latent perfectibility of man.” This was a humble rather than a preachy sort of Christian witness, a quiet reminder that Hawthorne and Melville were the better inheritors of the Puritan tradition and thus the better analysts of both natural and human evil.

Hence my enormous gratitude not only for Paul Barrus, but also for all of my other teachers of literature who made me consider the great counter-witnesses to Christian faith. I am a better Christian for having been steeped deeply in Camus and Beckett and Sartre, in Frost and Hemingway and Stevens. As Karl Barth often observed, the so-called “God” whom our best skeptical writers deny is often the No-God whom we should never believe to begin with: an arbitrary deity who jumps in and out of his creation like a divine factotum, doing our will whenever we beseech him, a sacred Santa Claus who brings us whatever we want whenever we are not naughty but nice. “The cry of revolt against such a god,” Barth declared, “is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him.”

Yet the literary texts I encountered during my years at East Texas State bore down upon me with positive no less than negative truths. They built up rather than tore down; they braced far more than they undermined. My chief literary awakening to moral and spiritual life had to do with race. To understand it, you must first permit me to set the southern racial scene wherein I was raised. I had grown up amidst rigid segregation and fully sanctioned discrimination. Blacks could not attend my schools and churches, it goes without saying, but neither could they use the public restrooms, drink from the public water fountains, eat in the public restaurants, nor sleep in the public hotels and motels. Segregation and discrimination combined to constitute a Southern victory that virtually overcame the loss of the Civil War. Racial superiority was the background noise of our lives, the racket which we could not hear because we heard nothing else. To question the inherited racial order was akin to a fish questioning water or a bird doubting the air.

Yet Mark Twain had indeed questioned it, and through *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* he made me question my own received assumptions about race. Yet Twain seared my conscience not by overt preaching, but rather by the subtlety and irony that only a great literary text can accomplish. A scene that struck me with special force occurs when Huck is returning from one of his escapades on the Mississippi and

reports to Tom Sawyer's aunt Sally that he had witnessed a boatwreck. "Anybody hurt?" she asks. "No'm," Huck replies. "Killed a nigger." Well it's lucky," Aunt Sally continues, "because sometimes people do get hurt."

This small exchange served as a veritable bombshell in my own small soul. Though I had been taught to sing that "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world," there was little in my own world to reinforce this profound biblical reality. On the contrary, nearly all of our social habits and practices counted against it. Now as then, the church's message hardly registered in a society whose alien values virtually overwhelm it. Yet a literary text broke through this hard social crust and awakened me to moral consciousness, as Twain reveals how a black man killed in a river disaster mattered little more than a dog or a cat that had been run over by a wagon.

I was again morally jolted by the more celebrated scene wherein Huck ponders whether he should inform Miss Watson about Nigger Jim's whereabouts. (I should add that Twain employs the slur word not to demean but to show Huck's complete conformity to Southern racial practice, and thus to measure his eventual liberation from it.) In a long moral meditation, Huck grapples with his own conscience. He counts the many ways wherein Jim has become to him the very embodiment of fidelity and unselfishness, of gratitude and guilelessness. To violate him, Huck senses, would be a crime against the very nature of things, a horror of metaphysical proportions. Yet Twain refuses to lecture or hector. Instead, he depicts Huck's moral moment of truth in entirely ironic terms. Huck's church and society have taught him that to violate the slave system is to contravene the law of God. If Huck does not turn Jim in, it follows, he will surely be damned. In a splendidly naive scene, where Huck thinks he is doing evil rather than good, he rips up the revealing letter to Miss Watson, declaring "All right, then, I'll go to hell."

Yet the scene that struck even deeper chords of resonance and reformation in my own racial consciousness occurs in William Faulkner's story called "The Bear." There the 16-year Ike McCaslin finds himself examining early 19th century ledgers kept by two of his great-uncles, Buck and Buddy. The two brothers had made these half-literate ledger-entries as they bantered back and forth about the McCaslin family's various dealings with their slaves. The crucial entry involves a certain black slave named Eunice: "Bought by Father in New Orleans 1807 \$650. Dolars. Marid to Aucyodus 1809 Drownd in Crick Christmas Day 1832." A second entry reads: "June 21th 1833 Drownd herself." Writing two days later, the second brother adds: "Who in hell ever heard of a niger drownding him self." What young Ike McCaslin has discovered to his staggering horror, though it had caused only vague puzzlement in his uncles—is the reason why Eunice had killed herself on Christmas day.

The day of the world's rebirth, we learn, had been the day of Eunice's deliberate death. For it was then that Eunice had first found out the truth that was beyond her bearing. She had discovered that her daughter Tomasina was pregnant. This

daughter, we also learn, had been fathered not by Eunice's slave husband Thucyodus but by Carothers McCaslin, the plantation owner himself. Twenty-two years later, this same "Tomy" had been impregnated by this same Carothers McCaslin—which is to say, by her own father. The next generation of McCaslin brothers finds it incomprehensible that a Negro slave like Eunice could be reflective enough to have cause for suicide. Yet their mention of it, six months later when Tomy herself died in childbirth, reveals that they were not totally opaque to the truth. Like Twain, Faulkner does not wag his finger in moralizing instruction. Instead, he uses indirection to reveal the horror that prompted Eunice's despairing act. Her self-murder was an act of metaphysical protest against a system so evil that the father of a slave child could summon that very girl to his bed of carnal lust and father yet another child on her. Faulkner enables his readers to overhear Ike's moral reveille as it is gradually but powerfully sounded, and thus to experience our own shock of recognition.

I do not mean to suggest that my own racial awakening was anything extraordinary. Many other youths of my generation underwent a similar jolting. I should also add that the work of Martin Luther King had a transformative effect on my consciousness, since he had so deeply rooted his racial protest in the Gospel: in the Christian summons to regard all men, no longer from a merely human point of view, but as people both created and re-created in God's own image. Nor could Faulkner and Twain have prized open my closed racial mind had the church not already done its preparatory work. The ministry of the Texas Baptist Student Union during the early 1960s was devoted largely to racial reconciliation. The pastor of Commerce's First Baptist Church, Julius Stagner, and the campus BSU director, Richard Norton, were unrelenting in their call for us to regard black people as our brothers and sisters in Christ. They stood courageously with us when we invited William Lawson, the black campus minister at Texas Southern, to address our own BSU chapter—perhaps the first black man ever to address a white audience on our campus.

So it is, then, that my undergraduate life was shaped decisively through teachers who stirred in me a lifelong love of literature. They created in me a symbiosis of things moral and imaginative. Yet the amalgam, the substance that made the two worlds bond together and cohere, was Christian faith itself. Paul Barrus taught me that, far from constricting human life, the tiny aperture that God opens at Bethlehem and Golgotha encompasses the widest of all worlds. There is nothing, in fact, larger than the Gospel. It is larger not only than everything *in* the world, as Chesterton so aptly said, it is larger than the world *itself*. Because everything finds its true size only in what Hopkins called the grandeur of God, there is no need to fear truths that come from non-Christian writers. They serve to challenge and stretch and deepen our faith in the God whose Gospel, even if they do not know it, is their beginning and middle and end.

A Little Local Gun Control

By Ron Sisk

[Dr. Ron Sisk is pastor of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.]

It started with an “Amen!”, several “Amens!” actually, an almost unheard of revivalistic outbreak in our properly sober Baptist congregation. But it was the Sunday after the shooting in Fort Worth. Our people were mad. And when the preacher let loose with a tirade against gun violence, you could feel the energy level in the room skyrocket.

Afterward, on the way out the door, several stopped to say, “OK, preacher, now what are you going to do about it?” Normally I hate it when they ask me to practice what I preach, but this time I felt different. That afternoon I got the chance to touch base with the head of our local interfaith council. She said, “We should see what the faith community wants to do.” So I did.

The next day I began calling ministerial friends—white and black Baptist, Presbyterian, Jewish. Eventually we got the Catholics, Methodists and UCC aboard as well. Without exception, they were ready to do something too.

The plan itself was simple. On a Sunday afternoon we would sponsor a nonpartisan political forum on what could be done to address the issue of gun violence. We would invite the religious community of Louisville and Jefferson County and every local, state, and federal level politician whom we elect. The forum would be a time for people of faith to talk with our elected leaders about what could be done. We set the meeting for Sunday, October 3, from 4 to 6 p.m. at our church.

Our first problem was how to send the right signal. We decided to set the tone with brief initial statements from the broadest possible spectrum of religious leaders. In this town the Roman Catholic archbishop is a key personality. He agreed without hesitation. The Catholic bishops have spoken strongly about the need for gun control. Our large Jewish population and the recent violence in Los Angeles meant a Rabbi of the local Reform congregation was eager to help. For the Protestant perspective we got an AfricanAmerican Baptist and the General Presbyter of the local presbytery, who is a female.

We also wanted to offer something practical that people could do immediately, regardless of the political success of the meeting. We came up with three ideas. First, we sought initial contributions from the sponsoring congregations and bought several hundred trigger locks. They became the altar piece at the forum itself. We took an offering, and before the afternoon was over we had a total of \$9000 dollars to purchase about 1500 locks. They will be given free to local gun owners.

Our second idea sought to involve the local arts communi-

ty. We asked for volunteers to form a task force to work toward a “Guns to Plowshares” sculpture to be offered to our city.

The idea was to develop a gun buyback program in which local congregations would offer money or children’s toys in exchange for unwanted guns. The guns would then become the raw material for the sculpture. And we would seek the city’s cooperation in displaying it in a prominent place. Dozens signed up.

Finally, we developed a petition which could be used by churches to send a message to local, state, and federal level politicians about measures which need to be taken. The petition calls for an outright federal ban on assault weapons. It asks our state to repeal a recent law allowing ministers to carry concealed weapons in the pulpit! It also suggests some more stringent measures, such as requiring all guns to be licensed, and all owners to attend a safety course in order to get their license renewed.

Once we had the meeting planned, our biggest question was, “Will the politicians show up?” Not all of them did. Our two senators rest comfortably within the deep pockets of the NRA. But our local representative, a Republican who is a practicing Catholic, did come. Also both her likely Democratic opponents in the next election showed up. The city and county police chiefs sent representatives. And some city aldermen and county commissioners came, as well as state representatives and senators.

Even more important, several hundred church members showed up, along with the news media, the local “militia”, and a few victims of gun violence. Twice that weekend,, once before the meeting and once afterward, we got “above the mast-head” headlines in our local paper.

Has it made any difference? I think so. The local faith community has been energized and unified by our common commitment to address the issue. The petition we created is making the rounds. The politicians were put on notice that we intend to pursue these priorities in the next election. Our interfaith task force is meeting to figure out how to distribute ,all those trigger locks. Our own denomination was seen as working with the rest of the religious community rather than displaying embarrassing exclusivism. And I got more hate mail than on any other subject I’ve ever dealt with as a pastor. Surprise. Surprise.

It started with an “Amen” and ended, as Simon and Garfunkel once sang, with “words I never heard in the Bible.” But that’s OK too. As another rabble rouser once said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” It’s time a lot more of us got blessed about gun control.

Watching the World Go By: Reconciliation

By Ralph Lynn, Former Baylor History Professor

Perhaps the most serious problem Christians now face is the necessity of reconciling our traditional religious views which have come from a geographically small, pre-urban, pre-scientific world, with our globalized, chiefly urban, science-directed, computer-driven, information-dominated present.

Aware of my limitations, I cannot offer even the framework of that needed reconciliation. But perhaps a survey of three crisis periods in Judeo-Christian history may give some guidance for the project.

In the Babylonian captivity, the prophet Ezekiel (As I understand the story) and his fellow Hebrews faced a challenge; they could assimilate and lose their identity or they could be true to themselves and find reason to hope for a long-term survival as a distinct people.

Sustained by the dawning consciousness that his God was as real in Babylon as he had ever been in Jerusalem, Ezekiel met the crisis with a three-point program. He assured the people that their heritage was superior to all others and he convinced them that the strict practice of circumcision and adherence to dietary restrictions would mark them off from their captors and help secure survival. Finally, he was careful to instruct the people that they must be good citizens of Babylon.

Jesus, in quite different circumstances, adopted a different tactic. By then, dietary and a thousand other restrictions had fixed the minds of the Hebrews less upon eternal spiritual values than upon daily, inconsequential concerns. To combat this situation, Jesus reminded them with an effective symbolism: the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

More importantly, Jesus did not abandon the Hebrew heritage: he planned to change “not a jot or a tittle.” Instead, quoting from what we call the Old Testament, he taught that the greatest laws were these: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self.”

The third figure to appear as a reconciler is the 13th century Dominican monk, Thomas Aquinas who set the pattern which we have followed.

The context in which he worked was different from that of both Ezekiel and Jesus. By the 12th and 13th centuries, the western Europeans were beginning to learn more of the intellectual achievements of the Greco-Roman antique world from the Arabic Moslems who had invaded Spain and southwestern France.

This new pagan literature based on rational, logical, scientific approaches, was so fascinating and frightening that the dominant Roman Catholic church condemned it.

Almost alone among the Christians, St. Thomas mastered the hitherto almost unknown logic of Aristotle and a good deal of his science. This courageous monk then wrote volume after volume to reconcile traditional Christianity with the convincing new knowledge.

Unfortunately but understandably, he trimmed Aristotle’s science to fit his era’s rigid Roman Catholic theological framework—which successive theologians have continued to do. Even so, it took several generations of Dominican lobbying to overcome Franciscan opposition and have Thomas forgiven and sainted.

Change then, as now, was king—and not just in religious circles. The increasing knowledge of Greek and Roman pagan antiquity persuaded secular minded people to launch out on their own intellectual adventures.

The result was the renewal of confidence of men and women in their ability to use reason and courage in analyzing, understanding, and trying to solve vexing earthly problems. This, we call the Renaissance.

Probably it is accurate to say that our current crisis began with this western European acquisition of our Greco-Roman heritage. This renewal of confidence in our ability to understand physical and social problems soon brought us Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Watt, and Darwin as well as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and others of our Founding Fathers.

These illustrious names are landmarks leading to the current overwhelming avalanche of change which we simultaneously love, hate, and fear.

Unable to essay the role of the reconciling prophet, perhaps I can at least point to the nettlesome problem with which, so far as my reading informs me, we must deal.

Instead of tailoring the incontrovertible facts of new knowledge to fit theological propositions, about which nobody can actually know anything, we need to face the harsh realities of the present and the future instead of appealing to a past not all of which has served us well.

Sadly, the present and the near future seem to hold little promise of the emergence of effective reconciliation. This is partly because knowledge is now so varied and so vast that no one person can hold in his mind all of the pieces of the puzzle.

St. Thomas operated in a simpler world. The literature then available was not beyond the mastery of one person. More importantly, St. Thomas needed to convince only a handful of fellow scholars whereas the modern reconcilers will inevitably have to contend with innumerable reactionary foundations, cynical and ignorant talk show hosts, and political and pulpit demagogues who will arouse our now democratic populace against any change.

Any reconcilers must try to avoid alienating the masses of believers. Like Ezekiel and Jesus, and even Thomas Aquinas, the reconcilers must persuade the people that they, too, must be realists.

The reconcilers must recall Ezekiel’s admonition to the Hebrew captives that they must be good citizens of the hated Babylon and Jesus’ instruction to his followers that they must “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” They must also remember Jesus’ command that his followers must be “as wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

THE CENTER FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

The Center for Christian Ethics exists to bear witness to the relevance of the Christian gospel in the world. It maintains an emphasis on applied Christianity with program activity based on Christian experience, Biblical truth, theological insight, historical perspective, current research, human needs, and the divine imperative to love God with our whole hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

CHRONOLOGY

- In 1988 plans were made and the foundations laid for the Center for Christian Ethics.
- In 1989 the Center for Christian Ethics name was carefully chosen.
- In 1990, on June 14, the Center was chartered as a non-profit corporation.
- In 1991, on June 17, the Center was granted 501(c)(3) standing by the Internal Revenue Service.
- In 1997, a mutually beneficial relationship between the Center and Baylor University was established, with the Center's primary offices situated in the Baylor Administration Building, in Pat Neff Hall, Waco, Texas.

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SUPPORT

Financial support for the Center for Christian Ethics has come from churches, through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, from Foundations, and from interested individuals.

CONTRIBUTIONS ARE

- Greatly needed
- Urgently solicited
- Genuinely appreciated

OBJECTIVES

- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics.
- Champion the moral values without which civilization itself could not survive.
- Publish a Christian ethics journal as a needed voice for the Christian ethics cause.
- Conduct forums to discuss critical ethical issues with a view to recommending practical responses.
- Address the ethical dimensions of public policy issues.
- Prepare and distribute Christian ethics support materials not being produced by others.
- Work with like-minded individuals and entities to advance the cause of Christian ethics.
- Perform needed Christian ethics projects and services for those welcoming such help.
- Recognize and honor those who have made unique contributions to the cause of Christian ethics.
- Utilize the contributions of responsible stewards who designate resources to be used in furthering the cause of Christian ethics.

The **VOICE** of the Center for Christian Ethics is *Christian Ethics Today*. Within the constraints of energy and finances, this journal is published about every other month. It is now sent without charge to those who request it.

COLLOQUIUMS are Center-sponsored conversations held several times a year with knowledgeable participants coming together to discuss relevant ethical issues with a view to recommending appropriate actions.

INITIATIVES in Christian Ethics (related to such things as race, class, gender, publishing, mass media, translation, teaching, and curricula) are Center agenda concerns.

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