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CROSS Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

Contents

CROSS Purposes

Issue 21 of *Cross Purposes* lacks a couple of our regular features, in order to accommodate a substantial contribution from William Loader. The "credo" series will resume in *CP* 22 with the ever-popular topic of the fatherhood of God; meanwhile we hope that anything this issue may lack in breadth it makes up for in depth.

Steve Taylor responds to Garry Deverell's critique of the "emerging church" and "alternative worship" in *CP* 17 by advocating a broader interpretation of what the "emerging church" can mean, in particular being open to new indigenous expressions of faith and not being tied to a "eurocentric" ecclesiology.

Lauren Mosso takes the advice of a neighbour to draw on the analogy of events in her home street for a sermon about renewal in the church, suggesting that some drastic architectural rethinking may be required.

William Loader's lecture addresses an enduringly tricky question, the hermeneutics of sexuality. The biblical texts by which the church's faith is shaped come from a world vastly different from our own; ancient peoples' attitudes and preconceptions about sexuality are in many cases alien to us, and are sometimes simply recognized as "so wrong". Prof. Loader is concerned with how we negotiate the cultural distance between the biblical world and the present, or indeed the future. It is not enough to jettison all allegiance to scripture, as some would prefer; Christians still want and ought to affirm in it that which is "so right". The challenge lies in the interpretive scheme we bring to bear in reading these ancient texts today.

And on the related theme of the "theological interpretation of scripture", Martin Wright reviews a recent contribution to exegetical literature from a major systematic theologian, Robert W. Jenson's commentary on Ezekiel.

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op. cit.

Steve Taylor

A Uniting Church an Emerging Church?

In May, I was privileged to participate, as the Norman and Mary Miller Lecturer, in the 28th gathering of the Queensland Synod. The opening worship was a highlight, a moving expression of the richness and diversity of the Uniting Church in Australia today.

The worship began with an indigenous cleansing ceremony, a welcome to country and the entry of diverse Uniting Church congregations. All were in traditional dress, singing and dancing as an expression of their unique culture. Each of the four bible readings was given in a different language, while the prayers of the people were enriched by the use of a conch shell. The communion table, in the shape of a boomerang, was draped in rich fabrics, in the colours of the rainbow and decorated with baskets of local produce. Celebration of communion included the great thanksgiving as a prayer of call and response that originated in Kenya. The prayer for the bread originated in the Church of South India, the gloria was a sung response using a chant from the Taizé community in France while other words from Augustine of Hippo were also utilized.

It was a rich and splendid liturgical feast. At the risk of being facetious, but in order to make a point that is both obvious, yet important, let me make the following observation: that the worship bore little relationship to the early church.

Let me explain. A welcome to country would make no sense for Jewish disciples, while the Passover table on that night before Jesus was betrayed took a very different shape to that of a boomerang. Nor would it have been laden with pineapple and bananas. Similarly the words that Jesus said that night around the table have been shaped and changed with time and by culture and can now come to us as gifts from Christians in Africa, Asia and Europe. Nor would those first disciples have dreamed of using a conch shell before they sung their hymn and left for the Mount of Olives.

Indeed, throughout Australia, our worship is starkly different from the Jewish origins of Christian faith. Such an observation is not a criticism. Quite the opposite, it is surely an obedient outworking of what the church in Acts 15 (the first ever synod) realized, that Christian faith

op. cit.

need not conform to Jewish patterns, nor be sheeted to Jewish culture. Rather, it was to find expression as one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith because of what Lamin Sanneh, Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, calls the "translatability" of the gospel, the Pentecost gift in which, in the words of Acts 2:8, each heard in their "own native language". To quote Lamin Sanneh:

> Translatability became the characteristic mode of Christian expansion through history. Christianity has no single revealed language, and historical experience traces this fact to the Pentecost event when the believers testified of God in their native tongues.[1]

Such an understanding, and the worship I was privileged to participate in at the Queensland Synod, helps me frame, understand and begin to critique the phenomena known as the "emerging church".

Emerging Church?

Garry Deverell, in the August 2009 edition of *Cross Purposes*, in an article titled "'Emerging' Church and 'Alternative' Worship", began a discussion on the relationship between the emerging church and the Uniting Church. He offered a thoughtful and thorough response to the work of one emerging church thinker, a visitor to Australia named Wolfgang Simpson.

Rather than respond in detail to Garry's considered response, I wish to raise an overall concern—that of "ecclesial pigeonholing"—and then offer a different way of looking at the emerging church.

A leading emerging church commentator, Andrew Jones, suggests that the emerging church actually comes in ten different types.[2] His typology used terms including new monastic orders, cyberchurches, pub churches and social enterprises. One of the ten types he identified is called "house churches, simple churches, organic churches". Using that typology, Wolfgang Simpson needs to be seen as an advocate of one type of emerging church, specifically "house/simple/organic church". So by choosing to focus on Wolfgang Simpson, Garry is effectively engaging with but one (of ten) strands of the emerging church. And by doing so, it does run the risk of "ecclesiologically pigeonholing" the emerging church as *sola* "house church".

It is perhaps tempting at this point to wonder how on earth one might gain an understanding of such a ten-stranded manifestation.

A metaphor offered by Brian McLaren initially offers some help. McLaren compares the church in history to that of a tree trunk. As a tree grows, it adds rings. Each ring tells us much about the unique environment of a particular season. In history, various denominations have emerged—Catholic, Baptist, Uniting, &c. McLaren imagines these

[1] *Translating the Message* (Orbis, 2008) 214.

[2] http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/12/10-types-of-emerging-church-that-no-longer-upset-your-grandfather.html

looking down on a cross section of the tree, as slices, like a pie, dividing up the tree trunk. Such an image acknowledges both the place of culture and history in

"The emerging church is shaped by the question of what form—in our unique environment, the season that is this new millennium—the church will take."

the development of Christian faith. The question raised by the emerging church is thus not, Is the emerging church a new slice of the denominational pie? Nor can it be a misplaced desire to return to peel of layers in order to return to some pristine version of the "original, early church pie". Rather, the emerging church is shaped by the question of what form—in our unique environment, the season that is this new millennium—the church will take. McLaren also notes that just as new rings can only be built on existing rings, so the future of the church, and of each denomination, can only be built on its uniquely ecclesial history.

In that light, Simpson is offering an "emerging" vision that, as Garry rightly points out, shows Simpson's ecclesiological heritage—low church anabaptist. This is as it should be, and it seems slightly less than (ecumenically) helpful for Garry to conclude that such a heritage is not actually Christian worship.

What Brian McLaren's image does is invite us to move beyond ecclesial pigeonholing and instead to consider the question: What does it mean for (____ insert denomination) to emerge (grow a unique ring) in this current season? Which, it seems to me, is the question that is the heart of what it means to be Uniting (as against a "United" church). We are charged with an open commitment to "emerge", always, in light of the unique history that is the Uniting Church in Australia.

Global Church in History?

However, one concern with McLaren's metaphor needs to be named. It is a warning heard in the writings of English theologian Colin Gunton, who wrote:

> In the West … ecclesiological discussion in our time nearly always centres on, or degenerates into, disputes about clergy and bishops, the result being that the question of the nature or being of the Church is rarely allowed to come into view.[3]

In other words, while for the first thousand years of the life of church, the church actually found emerging expression in three continents—Asia, Europe and Africa—it has been too easy for most Western discussion of the church to simply draw a straight line from Jerusalem to Rome to Europe. Such an approach starts with biblical data and then moves through Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Church*, to explore the Reformation, and in particular Protestant responses in Germany, Switzerland, Scotland and England. But the geography is significant, for it is all European.

[3] *On Being the Church* (Clark, 1989) 49.

The warning by Colin Gunton should be of particular concern to the Uniting Church, given its commitment to belong to one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Hence it is not enough to simply draw our theology from what has gone before or to consider only our part of McLaren's ecclesial tree trunk.

A few years ago, religious historian Philip Jenkins noted that Christianity has a lost history. This was illustrated visually on the cover of his book, *Lost History of Christianity*, which had a world map in three equal parts—Asia, Europe and Africa.[4] Jenkins traced a vibrant Christian presence for the first thousand years of church history, a faith emerging and finding root in the cultures spread through Asia and Africa as well as Europe.

One example is the city of Merv, in what is now modern day Turkmenistan. By the twelfth century Merv (not Rome) was one of the largest cities on the planet. Yet in this pluralistic Asian city, Christianity has had a long and vibrant history. The size of the church is evident by the appointment of a bishop in Merv in 420 AD. Then by the year 500, a seminary existed in Merv, training Christian leaders. It had a library that included significant intellectual resources including texts by philosophers like Aristotle.

Another example is seen in 1287, when a Christian bishop, in ethnicity from near Beijing, was sent by Kublai Khan to the Christian Europe. He sought to meet the Pope, who was amazed at his Christian faith, again emerging from a pluralistic Asian context.

[4] HarperOne, 2008.

Jenkins urges a global view of one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, given "the historical norm: another, earlier global Christianity once existed".[5] For a thousand years, faith was thoroughly enculturated, finding "translatabilitiy" in Syriac, Persian, Turkish, Soghdian and Chinese. In sum:

> Through much of history, leading churches have successfully framed the Christian message in the context of non-Greek and non-European intellectual traditions, of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.[6]

The *Basis of Union* invites us to be part of the worldwide church. That demands we leave behind a eurocentric vision of ecclesiology.

Global Church Today?

I have noted briefly the diversity of the church in history. At the risk of repeating myself, a similar point can be made by considering the church today.

A helpful window is provided by Norman Thomas in his *Readings in World Mission*.[7] It is intended as a companion volume to the magisterial *Transforming Mission* by David Bosch.[8] While Bosch synthesizes, Thomas compiles readings and lets them speak for themselves. In so doing we hear a contemporary, and global, doctrine of the church, from Africa, South and North America, Asia, Europe (although neither from Australasia nor Oceania!). In the readings we find a repeated call for an emerging church.

[5] Ibid., 3.
[6] Ibid., 39.
[7] SPCK, 1995.
[8] Orbis, 1990.

Let me note some highlights.

Roland Allen ("Establishing Apostolic Plan Churches", 1912) urged the church to make mission a priority. He drew on a key theological metaphor, that of the apostle Paul, to argue for a church that finds expression as indigenous in the culture. Just as Paul moved on, so risk must be essential for an emerging church identity.

The International Missionary Council at Tambaran ("The Essential Task of the Church", 1938) urged the centrality of the local church. It contrasted dead congregations with living congregations, the latter marked by common worship, shared love, discipline, acts of public service, study of scripture and a missionary spirit. Such fruit should be expected because of the church's connection with Christ. A key theological metaphor is of being an ambassador of Christ, in which the church is a conscience in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer ("The Church for Others", 1944), writing in Germany under the storm clouds of Nazi Socialism, declared the church must exist for others. This took practical shape in the giving away of property and a freedom from state benefit. The church is called to share in secular life and draws on an eschatological hope. A key theological metaphor was Christ as a man for others.

The International Missionary Council in Ghana ("The Only True Motive of Mission", 1958) urged a key theological metaphor of *missio dei*. Mission is Christ's, not the church's. The task of the church is to be Christ's word both of judgement and mercy.

Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and *Ad Gentes* (1965), viewed the church as gifted in grace and asked to be faithful in mission. This begins in the mission of the Son and the Spirit, acts of love that resource and shape the mission of the church today. While the church waits for the fullness of God's reign, it is to be a pilgrim church "among all the creatures which groan and travail".

The World Council of Churches ("The Missionary Task of the Church", 1967) stated that God's activity could not be confined to the church. Rather, the church starts with an orientation toward the world. Discernment, including humble dialogue with non-Christians, was thus required in order to recognize God's activity beyond the church. The most important duty of the church is to be present. Flexible structures, in both new and existing forms of church, are expected.

Henry Sawyer ("The Church as the Great Family", 1968), in Africa, patterned the church on how people grow. As Jesus lived and grew as the firstborn in a family, so the church must be a great family, growing in a way that transcends class, tribe and nation.

Letty Russell ("Open Ecclesiology", 1974) urged a church free in order to participate in mission. Mission is helping people hear the freeing word of Jesus. This includes the freedom to explore new forms of church. Jesus is the centre of a church without walls.

Mathai Zachariah ("The Church: A Peoples' Movement", 1975) considered the changing context in India, in which

the state was moving into what had been the domain of the church, welfare. This was forcing a focus outside the boundaries of the church and requiring new images of church. The church is the firstborn fruits of God's cosmic activity. However, God's action is not to be considered as solely in the church, but where the gospel is meeting human struggle.

Listening to such voices is essential to being part of a global church. The readings share common themes. To be the church is to find a primary identity in mission. From that will flow a commitment to new forms and fresh expressions, rooted both in the missionary identity found in God's life, a lifegiving relationship with Christ and the willingness to find indigenous cultural expression. Such an understanding of church makes sense of the emerging church, to the diversity of forms noted earlier by Andrew Jones, to the willingness to let the church take indigenous shape in the cultures of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Let me weave some threads together. I wish to express my concern with an "ecclesiological pigeonholing", both with regard to describing the emerging church and with regard to a eurocentric view of church history and contemporary cultural expression.

In contrast it has been argued that the church should always be emerging and that this is seen in the Spirit's work of translatability, in the book of Acts, throughout church history and in the global church today. This offers us a potentially enriching global theology, as was evident at the 28th Queensland Synod in May, with a worship expressing the diversity of culture, using a liturgy nourished by Christian faith that has emerged in Africa, Asia and Europe.

Hence I want to urge that a global vision of "translatability" be used in any discussion of the emerging church, whether offered by Garry Deverell, Wolfgang Simpson or Brian McLaren. The emerging church invites a global, missional theology. It is not a Western manifestation, a product of books in the USA or fresh expressions in the United Kingdom.

Rather, it is a response to the impulse of the Spirit, at Pentecost, throughout church history and across the expanse of global culture.

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With thanks to the Church, Ministry, Sacraments class of 2010, who helped me workshop much of the material in this paper.

through a glass darkly

Lauren Mosso

Dismantling the Wall

a sermon on 1 Kings 17:8-24 and Luke 7:11-17

At the end of my street in North Melbourne, there is a wall. It is rather ugly but we have all gotten used to it, and it's always been there, at least since we moved in. It keeps the street quiet, and makes it very effectively into a dead end, so that keeps the traffic down. People don't come down our street unless they need to. Many people don't even know our street exists, and we like it that way—it's quiet and peaceful, even though it's very industrial to look at. After all, the wall is over two stories high.

In fact, we had stopped noticing the wall existed at all. We were just used to it, never gave it a thought. Until one day we received a notice in the letterbox from our neighbour at the end of the laneway, whose home is adjacent to the wall. He was very worried because the owner of the property was going to demolish the building behind the wall. This meant that the wall would be coming down, and replaced with a much lower chain link fence covered in shade cloth.

As neighbours we were concerned—what would happen to our street without the wall to protect us? Would we end up with people using the laneway as a shortcut through the busy roads in our area? Would we end up with a vandalism problem? Worse yet, would we end up with a six-storey apartment block?

We tried to argue that it was "our" wall, and that we like things the way they are. We recognized that the owner had the right to demolish their building, but we wanted them to leave "our" wall alone. In the end they agreed to leave most of the wall there.

And then they changed their minds.

So right now the wall is coming down, brick by brick, in a noisy and slow process.

But we are seeing light, and a completely new view, in the spaces where the wall once was. And while the future is uncertain, in the short run we will have more light and air, and a new feeling of freedom as our view has been extended. While we don't know where all this will lead, right now we are gaining a new outlook and some fresh air and sunshine. There may be moves afoot at some future time to do something we don't like. But in the meantime the wall has united the neighbours and given us the opportunity to build trust in each other, and to become more of a caring community. It has also taken away our security blanket, so we will have to replace our insularity with a greater awareness of the world around us.

through a glass darkly

We will need to look out for each other more.

Since the wall has started coming down, we have had some interesting conversations with our neighbours. Dave said in his cockney accent that a city is always changing, and that's what he likes about it. We got the chance to welcome Di and Ian back from overseas holidays while we were standing outside talking to James about the demolition, and we welcomed David and Myrna back from their holiday as well. David always asks me about my ministry, and suggested that the wall could make a good sermon… wonder if he's right?!

The reason why I am telling you about this wall is because it reminds me of a situation closer to home, closer to our home together here in the Banyule Network of Uniting Churches. Our scripture readings today are all about renewal and transformation brought about by God's compassion. Paul speaks of his own change of heart in Galatians, and in the parallel stories from 1 Kings and Luke's Gospel a young man is restored life, and returned to his mother, in a show of God's mercy and strength. The stories are more about the mother than the son, as Jesus reached out to her because he had compassion for her. Drastic times called for drastic measures, and in touching the funeral bier of the dead son Jesus broke every rule in the book. Jesus broke through the barrier between death and life out of compassion and love. In doing so he restored life to the son, and he restored community to the mother. And the crowd who witnessed these events saw that this was from God, and they glorified God and told everyone about it.

In some ways we could say that the community offered through our drop-in centre restores people to life, and to community. This is a very important and compassionate ministry of our congregation, and of all the volunteers who serve there. It is an amazing place, and it is something to be proud of. It is one of the many ways people from this congregation show Jesus' love and compassion to people in our community.

The drop-in centre is a good example of the way the church has changed. I understand that it began as a drop-in centre for parents with young children, and that it slowly evolved into a drop-in centre for the elderly. Now it is a place of welcome and love for people of all ages, mainly younger people, many of whom have a disability.

The church is always on a path of renewal, and for the Uniting Church this renewal began in the lead-up to union nearly 33 years ago and hasn't stopped yet. So if you add it up there have probably been about fifty years of change. But while we have wonderful, caring congregations of faithful disciples of Jesus, it is clear that our Uniting Church denomination is not attracting people in the middle and younger age groups, although we have so much to offer, and although when they do come we welcome them with open arms.

It is actually a great sadness to many people that their children and grandchildren no longer attend church. Meanwhile, our current ways of being

the church are not sustainable into the future. This problem is well-documented, and it is a topic for discussion at Synod and presbyteries. It was also discussed at our own Banyule Network workshop last weekend. No doubt it is being discussed all around Australia as our church tries to work out a way forward into the future.

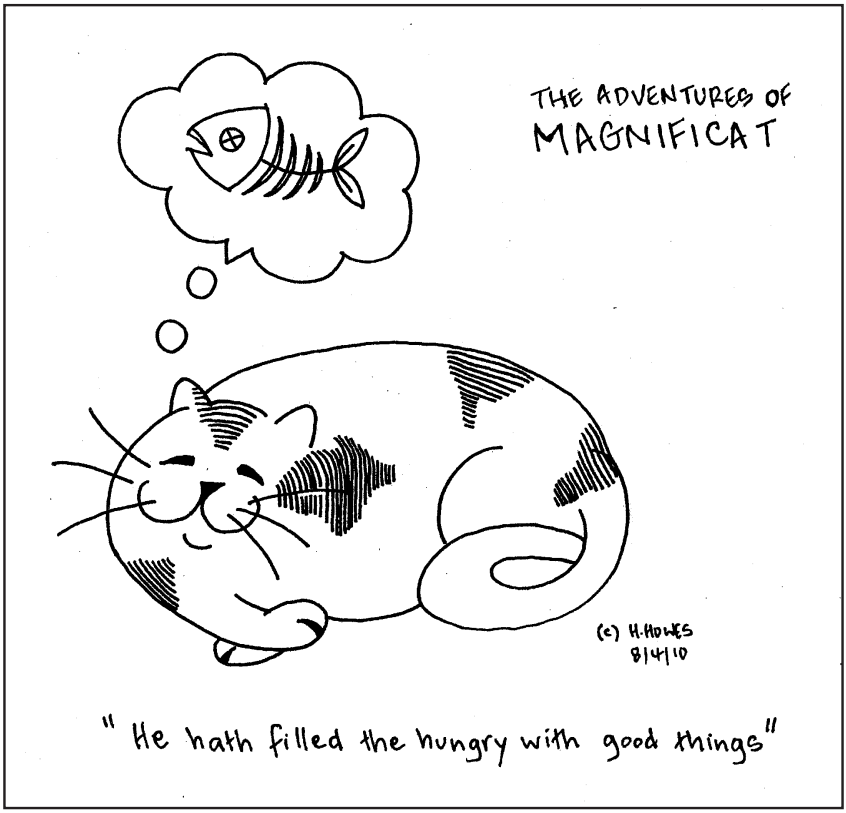
While no one can claim to know what the future will look like, the time is right to begin to dismantle our walls, brick by brick, so that we can free up resources to reach out to our lost generations. We're in this together. We need to sort this out.

Our scripture readings speak of transformation. This is not simply change as in "re-arranging the deck chairs", but truly transformative change that will enable us as a church to share the good news of the gospel, that God loves us and is with us and for us, and that Jesus has broken through the barrier between death and life out of compassion and love. The world around is in desperate need of hearing this good news.

Lauren Mosso is an intern minister in Heidelberg-East Ivanhoe UC.

double take

Hilary Howes



on Areopagus Hill

William Loader

Sexuality in the World of Jesus and the Future

It is with some reluctance that I venture to present a lecture on sexuality which includes a future dimension, since my specialist competence lies in attitudes towards sexuality around the time of Jesus, not in analyses of the present and projections into the future. On the other hand, what happens in the future of Christianity with regard to sexuality will have a lot to do with how future Christianity appropriates and relates to its heritage, not least its biblical heritage, for better or for worse, and this is worth addressing, not least because such responses affect people, and always have.

The World of Jesus

It seemed fitting to speak of the "World of Jesus" rather than the bible or Jesus or the biblical tradition, because then as now, and doubtless in the future, much of what is believed about sexuality and sexual behaviour was deeply engrained in the way society at large saw such issues, often without a lot of reflection. It is also appropriate to consider this world of Jesus because one of the central characteristics of Christianity is that it constantly engages the present and, indeed, the future, by engaging the past, which gives it its identity, despite a distance of 2000 years. And, more significantly, it does so despite hugely different understandings of the world in which we live.

For in general they assumed a world that was flat or perhaps saucer-shaped, and an atmosphere populated by demons who found their way into the lower regions of the atmosphere, and also into the lower regions of the human body. Many of those who gave us our heritage assumed that history would shortly come to an end anyway by divine intervention to rectify what had gone wrong and at last bring some justice and order far beyond what Rome's propaganda claimed it could bring. 2000 years on we have the same yearning for justice and peace, but have long since surrendered such expectations about history's imminent end. We explain the vicissitudes of atmosphere and illness by less personalized bugs, bacteria and viruses, and our world has turned out to be a planet flung about in the magnetic fields of an ever expanding universe, a mere speck in the endless flow of the galaxy to which we belong, which, in turn, is a

grain of sand on the shore of endlessness that is beyond us.

Paradoxically, then, we hail as so right what in these respects at least is so absolutely wrong; but that is because, like generations before us, we believe the values embedded in that ancient system of reflection or, perhaps more directly, claim even that it addresses us and our humanity in our own experiential vernacular.

Sex in the World of Jesus

Issues of sexuality are a case in point, where a similar sense of distance and proximity jostle for our attention.[1] In the world of Jesus, households were the cornerstone of society. Without insurance and with a minimum of infrastructure support, people survived or did not, depending on the health and wealth of the households to which they belonged or on which they were dependents. Stability of households was paramount. Progeny, preferably male progeny, was essential for the household's survival, not only to secure its future but also to support the aged. Access to the female progeny of others was also an essential component. Marriage was a core element of household. Men married generally around thirty, women as early as fourteen and most before turning twenty. Husband was more like father than big brother. Commonly, reflective authors of the time note the parental role of the husband in relation to his wife. Age difference and social expectation sustained an inequality, which at its best saw women as valued support, able to run the domestic household, and deserving, in turn, of appropriate support and oversight.

Fidelity was more important for them than for men, because only women could get pregnant. Chaos ensues if the wife gives birth to another's child within the household, who might inherit what is not rightly his and destabilize life for all. Nothing could guarantee such fidelity, but making sure she was a virgin before marriage was a start. So virginity was a prized possession, valued primarily in its female form and shrouded with a mystique of purity. In an age without effective contraception virginity and fidelity were an obvious must. Men mostly could not cope anyway where the expectation was that they not marry till nearly thirty. So prostitution had a ready market, though at least in Jewish society this was discouraged.

Courtship was rarely possible and the wide and wonderful adventures of dating which preoccupy our world were virtually nonexistent, since marriages were arranged, a practice still the dominant pattern, for instance, in India, where liaisons independent of parental arrangement must hide themselves in gardens,

[1] For much of what follows see William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) and William Loader. *Engaging Sexuality in the New Testament* (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010). See also William Loader, "Sexuality and the Historical Jesus," in *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus* (ed. Tom Holmén; London: Clark, 2007) 34-48.

or, as I observed recently, in nooks and crannies of the Taj Mahal, not altogether inappropriately, and some face the risk of family ostracism or even death at the hands of parents if found out. Married men, if wealthy, also had access to the servant girls, and polygamy provided a convenient way out where hot had become cold, at least for those who could afford it and live like the patriarchs. It was a world very different from ours.

Adultery was almost universally condemned, and, despite that, almost universally practised. The strictest Jewish and Roman law not only outlawed it, but required that divorce must follow. So adultery was not simply sufficient ground to sue for divorce, as in many legal systems well into the twentieth century, but an action which required divorce. We see this assumption working its way out in Matthew's nativity narrative, where Joseph, confronted by what equated to adultery by his betrothed Mary, had no choice but divorce, but then showed his righteousness according to Matthew by choosing the less humiliating option of divorcing her privately (Matt. 1:19). Sexual intercourse by a woman with a man other than her husband rendered a woman unclean for the first husband (Deut. 24:1-4) and that was that. No such thing as marriage counselling or forgiveness. This understanding is the best explanation for the addition found in Matthew's versions of Jesus' prohibition of divorce (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; cf. Mark 10:10-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor. 7:10-11). Matthew's "except for adultery" simply spelled out what all apparently assumed: adultery made divorce mandatory, a very different world from ours; dare one say, less Christian; at least, less compassionate.

Things that do not bother us bothered them. Some believed every issue of semen drained the stock of life from a man. Widespread was the anxiety that seed might run out, so that wasted semen, whether by *coitus interruptus* or masturbation, or through sexual intercourse during menstruation, after childbirth, and for some during pregnancy, and certainly with another male, threatened to depopulate the cities, as Philo, the first century Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, for instance, insists, and contravened what they saw as nature's purpose for sex. We know the little fish are a lot more numerous than they supposed. Not all demanded that no sex occur where procreation could not eventuate, but the view got legs, particularly as elite philosophy, where it was most espoused, impregnated early Christianity, and it survives today in the official banning of contraception.

Surprisingly this kind of argumentation is not attested in our biblical traditions, which are still strongly Jewish in their affirmation of the union, including sexual union, between man and woman, explicit in the creation myths, celebrated in the Song of Solomon, and made the basis for Jesus' argument that such union is God's intent—without mentioning procreation in that context (Mark 10:6-9). This then is the basis for asserting that sexual intercourse seriously joins people in a way that to separate them

is to try to unstick what God has stuck together and so to contravene God's creative handiwork (Mark 10:9; Gen. 2:24). Paul reflects the same presupposition in citing the same Genesis text to oppose sexual intercourse with prostitutes because one becomes thereby one flesh with them (1 Cor. 6:16; Gen. 2:24). The prostitute and a good many others since would doubtless deny sexual intercourse gets you permanently stuck to someone in reality.

Christians in their Jewish World

Within the range of Jewish options Christianity generally reflected the approach which affirmed sexual relations in marriage, forbade it beyond that, but held back from the more extreme views, such as those of the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Damascus Document*, which forbade sexual intercourse on the Sabbath. Christians show no sign of taking sides in the debates about whether one could marry a niece, and otherwise generally assume the Leviticus laws about forbidden degrees of marriage. This includes, most fatefully, John the Baptist's rather extreme insistence, doubtless with Jesus' support, that Herod Antipas committed incest by marrying his step-brother's divorced wife (Mark 6:17-18), something our laws would readily allow.

They probably espoused the other laws enunciated in Leviticus, including forbidding sex during menstruation, and certainly bestiality and same-sex relations (Lev. 18:19, 22-23). Paul provides our only explicit evidence of the latter (Rom. 1:24-32; 1 Cor. 6:9), but the likelihood that he and fellow believers stood under the influence of the Jewish prohibitions in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 is very strong, including expanding it to include same-sex relations among women. Interestingly, however, one of the main rationales offered by those roughly his contemporaries, Pseudo-Phocylides, Philo, and Josephus, namely that it thwarts nature's sole purpose for sex, making babies, is strikingly absent. Paul may simply think that time for that has run out, but it would also clash with his view expressed elsewhere which sees more to sex than procreation (1 Cor. 7:1-4). He certainly views same-sex acts as contrary to nature, a view he expects both Gentiles and Jews to share (Rom. 1:26-27), probably less on the basis of analytical reflection on the complementary shape of genitals[2] and more on the basis of the general discomfort of heterosexuals in relation to what is unnatural for them, a natural response as much alive today.

Taking the sting out of Paul's strong condemnation by suggesting he condemns only heterosexuals who engage in same-sex relations, not homosexuals,[3]

[2] Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 254-57; Robert A. J. Gagnon, "The Bible and Homosexual Practice" and "Response to Dan O. Via" in Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 41-92, 99-105, 78; and "Notes to Gagnon's Essay in the Gagnon-Via *Two Views* Book," www.robgagnon.net/2VOnlineNotes.htm.

[3] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social*

or that he targets only pederasty,[4] or means same-sex acts only in pagan religious contexts,[5] or even targets only those who condemn,[6] serves no fruitful purpose. He may have known primitive theories about some people being born with homosexual orientation.[7] Gagnon, who champions applying Paul's prohibition today, thinks he did and so was especially targeting homosexuals, victims of the fall, as Gagnon see them, demanding their celibacy.[8] It seems to me much more likely that Paul would have dismissed such claims to natural homosexual orientation and implicitly therefore not only condemned the acts but also the attitudes and orientation[9] as something brought about by human perversion, especially by excess of passion, leading to activities in which what we would call heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals, in Paul's day engaged.[10] Paul's rather incidental reference to such behaviour reflects his espousal of a widespread Jewish view, also held by many of his elite Gentile contemporaries. He knew to combine biblical prohibition with the rationales which made sense in his day.

On the other hand, Christianity shared with some other Jews a vision of the future which differs from the more common Jewish expectation. The latter expectation envisaged a restored Israel looking like their present but with all evil removed, with a restored temple in whose precincts sexual intercourse is, of course, out of place and unclean, but existing beside the cities and lands of normal life where sex would be very much in place and produce a wonderful harvest of offspring. Jesus, by contrast, is reported in one tradition as having declared that there would be no marrying or being given in marriage, that is, no sex in the world to come (Mark 12:25). This expectation cohered with the view that the new world would not contain a temple, but be, itself, a temple, thus leaving no place for sexual relations. Similar assumptions also lie behind Paul's concession to those wanting therefore to

Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1980) 109.

[4] Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

[5] J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration* (Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality; Westport: Praeger, 2008) 122.

[6] L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (2nd. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 122.

[7] Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998) 8-9.

[8] Gagnon, "Notes," n. 142.

[9] So Andrie B. du Toit, "Paul, Homosexuality and Christian Ethics," in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honour of Peder Borgen* (ed. David E. Aune; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 92-107, 103-104.

[10] On this see David E. Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 197-222.

insist on abandoning having sex in marriage already in the present age. Instead he limits sexual abstinence to periods of prayer, the assumption still being that the place and time of prayer and the place and time of sex are incompatible (1 Cor. 7:5-7). The potential for such a future vision to demean sex as something not worth keeping, as unholy and unworthy, did apparently inspire some to live, as Revelation puts it in describing the 144,000, as "virgins who had not defiled themselves with women" (14:4), and others to insist that all should be celibate. The creation tradition, however, was too strong for this to prevail, so that where Jesus and then Paul identify their personal choices and calling in this direction, they insist at the same time, that this must not be seen as the pattern for all (Matt. 19:10-12; 1 Cor. 7:7).

"By its nature, Christianity refuses to espouse the strategy of cutting loose from the past. Instead, it engages in the paradox of hailing as so right what is, in so many respects, so wrong."

Much else could be said of that world, including, for instance, its two most common notions of conception, one which saw the man sowing the seed and the woman functioning as fertile soil, the other, that both produce semen which intermingles, a view roughly akin to our own. Notions of sexual union as joining what originally belonged together but had been split apart were present in two versions. The one, enunciated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, fantasized that human beings were once of three varieties, male, female and bisexual, and that Zeus annoyed at their arrogance, split each in two, so that they have forever since sought to rejoin: the two halves of the bisexual in male meeting female, and the two halves of the original male and original female in homosexual and lesbian union. By most that appears to have been seen as a joke, certainly by Jews, as a bad joke, for their version, the creation myth, begins with only a male from whom woman is extracted as a rib; but it generates a similar theory of sexual attraction: restoring the original oneness of flesh.

Their World and Ours

Theirs was a very different world. To underline the distance between them and us, as I have done, is sufficient for some to warrant setting all ancient worldly sexual mores aside and to create our own for the present and the future. Many heave a sigh of relief that with one sweep of the hand those prohibitions of same-sex relations especially can be dismissed once and for all as no more relevant to the present than requiring women to worship with heads covered.[11] By its nature, however, Christianity refuses to espouse the strategy of cutting

[11] Some see this as the import of Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

loose from the past. Instead, as noted above, it engages in the paradox of hailing as so right what is, in so many respects, so wrong: wrong surely in its notion of adultery mandating divorce, its preoccupation with female virginity, its understanding of semen, and much more. Yet, like generations before us, we persist in the engagement with this ancient past as if it still throws light on sexuality today and into the future—I think, with good reason.

Some of its rays still shoot across our dark skies. When Jesus, like his best contemporaries, shifts the focus from adultery to adulterous attitudes, and addresses the purposing of adultery rather than just its performance, implicitly linking that prohibition with the prohibition against coveting, he confronts who we are more than just what we do, effectively making the heart, or we would say, the brain the most important organ of our sexuality. This is a major advance we still struggle to follow.

Later hearers interpreted his words "whoever looks at a woman (clearly someone else's wife) for the purpose of having her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:28) as meaning: "whoever looks at any woman with the result that he has sexual desire for her". This had the effect of seeing the text as condemning all sexual response by men to women, and vice versa, equating sexual response therefore with sin, thus creating an impossible dilemma from which an elite might escape into celibacy and others might pretend only to have sex without desire. Since this became a special concern for men, the necessary conclusion was obvious: women, by being sexually attractive, posed a constant threat to the souls of men. They should therefore be controlled, confined and covered—for man's protection, a practice well-intended and still widely practised in many cultures today. In Matthew, however, presumably reflecting Jesus, the focus was not women's sexuality, but men's. It was good Judaism to assume that having a sexual response to women was natural and good; the issue was what one did with it. Women were not responsible for men's sexual responses and what they did with them. Women were not to be seen as dangerous. Otherwise it is hard to explain the open acceptance of women within the early movement. Men need to own their own sexuality, and women, theirs. To ask, what is your brain doing, is to place the emphasis elsewhere than on mere actions. It takes sexuality into an understanding of a way of being where it keeps company with those generative responses of love, anger, hate, fear, compassion, which invite us to make decisions that direct behaviour.

One of the important emphases which found expression in the conflicts of Jesus and Paul with many of their contemporaries was the extent to which attitudinal change produced behaviour. In different ways both spoke of behaviour as fruit and so focused on the health of the tree (Matt. 7:17-18; Gal. 5:22). When forced to defend his stance towards biblical law Paul can even assert that such attitudinal change and inner orientation, expressed

by him as the power of the Spirit of Christ within, can, indeed achieve more effectively what the ten commandments intend (Rom. 8:1-4). Love, indeed, and its foundation, being loved, produces an attitude of love, which in turn produces behaviour which gives expression to love, even far beyond what the biblical injunctions prescribe and enjoin. Such brilliant light breaks through the clouds of conflict, and shows itself to be among humanity's best insights, attested, as we now recognize, in many of the world's religions and in the best wisdom of secular society, then and now.

Such enlightenment cast its rays into a complex social world which then had to work out what this meant in concrete terms. Did it mean, for instance, that non-Jews might be equally valued with Jews and what then would the implications be? They almost did not make it through the morass of conflicting answers which that questioning of established tradition evoked. Did it mean the same for women as it did for men? There are indications that some, at least, dared to think so, though there is considerable doubt that people really grappled with what it might mean for households, men's and women's roles, and sexuality in general (cf. Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-6:9). We have no way of interpreting the silence in our early material, for instance, about the assumed right of household heads to have sexual access to their slaves. The light did not dissipate the clouds about what such love and respect for every human being meant in practice and in some respects Christian ethics scarcely made it past what the best moral philosophers of the day were advising, who, for instance, have much better things to say about marital love.

Engaging the Distant Past

Our engagement with the past in order to engage the present and future is part of a continuing process of learning and discerning what that light is really showing us. We rehearse the ancient rituals, ponder the same myths, retell the same stories, because, for all their grandeur and oddness, we find nourishment there. Some, like the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, cast their ray of truth even when people may have no inkling of what a Samaritan was, let alone a Levite. The hope for the future is that this strange engagement will continue, never to be distilled into timeless propositions, always to be held in the unresolved solution of myth and reality that liturgy, colour, and celebration sustains.

This is the context then for projecting ourselves into prediction and hope about sexuality in the context of the future of Christianity. It is not as though we are simply dealing with two poles: the first and the twenty-first century and, perhaps, beyond. Much else lies in between, which this brief summary passes over. At least, three more important factors from the "in-between" deserve special mention as we reflect on the twenty-first century, to give due to its world to match the greater attention we have given to the first.

The first factor, industrialization and urbanization beginning in the last three

to four centuries, created a situation where for the first time on any large scale fewer households looked like their ancient counterparts where the means of sustenance were largely home grown and ground, and where both men and women played an important part. With the advent of men leaving their households to earn money in employment in industry, households changed both for men and for women, the man now assuming the role of "breadwinner", the woman, in many instances, no longer engaged in the household cottage industry. In its extreme form this created a new crisis of inequality unlike that of the ancient world's hierarchy. This situation became increasingly common to the point where, were it not for World Wars, at least in the west, women would be reduced to a vacuous existence of potentially critical proportions. Employment during the war years in the late thirties and early forties then raised the problem acutely when after their major contributions they were now to be fitted back into domesticity to make room for jobs for the men. The myth of the male breadwinner and female spouse at home, something of a fabrication and falsely touted as how life had always been, and even as the biblical model, scarcely survived the 1950s, though it remained alive and well with those who continued to live by the 1950s at least to the end of the millennium.

The voices of protest through both gentle and aggressive feminism and the advent of the pill, the second and third factors, are both of enormous significance since they changed the landscape forever. Like the earlier bright light of which I spoke, this candle of hope and torch of discovery stirred new possibilities. But the clouds were and remain persistent. The breakthroughs came only with struggle: ordination of women, even as bishops—very recent. On the negative side, while sexually transmitted diseases were known in the ancient world, we now face more virulent strains which have already had disastrous consequences and are a constant threat which must inform all decisions about sexual behaviour.

In areas of sexuality such changes have changed the heavens of human confusion and dispersed or at least reassembled the clouds in ways that now mean we need to engage in a process of finding new perspectives in relation to sexuality. In what follows I want to identify questions more than I want to give answers and I do so quite deliberately as one who stands in the paradoxical tradition of those who embrace ancient wisdom and engage its rightness and acknowledge where it appears, like us at times, to be wrong.

Stoic Wisdom

Let me begin with a defence of the much-maligned Stoics. As prominent classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum has aptly illustrated, the philosophers of the late Hellenistic and early Roman Hellenistic period chose to focus on what produces a fulfilled life, and in the process provided some of the most detailed and insightful depictions

of the human psyche and human behaviour ever penned.[12] Some of this rubbed off onto Jewish writers, including Philo, the author of 4 Maccabees and to some extent, Paul. In their Jewish versions, the concern is management of the passions. It is easy to dismiss the Stoics as denying passions, emotions, altogether, and one certainly finds ample evidence of a tendency to reduce sexual pleasure to the regrettable accompaniment of sexual intercourse which has as its sole warrant the making of babies. Most of the time, however, we find a plea not for the extirpation of the passions, but for their proper management. There were alternative views, including those which explored the possibilities of running with one's emotions, or at least of handling one's passions without the restraint of traditional mores, and of finding new ways of being.

While history never repeats itself in anything like a careful match, it does seem to me that the latter half of the twentieth century underwent its own adolescence of questioning established mores, experimenting with free flowing passion, and then finding itself as a consequence now having to face issues of management. So we live in an age concerned with anger management, hunger management, and management of sexual desire. All three impulses are potentially quite dangerous. The heady days of the libertine 1970s and 1980s moderated as we reached the closing decades of the century. Too many people went off the rails, including clergy. The affirmation of human sexuality needed to be accompanied by ethical codes for professionals. What this recognizes is what the Stoics recognized, and most cultures recognize, sometimes in quaint and seemingly overrestrictive ways, and this is: our sexual urges are very powerful. They are capable of taking over, just as can anger and our desire to eat. Like those urges they are good, but they need direction. Spontaneity simply will not do. Just to follow your gut simply will not do. Doing it because it feels good simply will not do. The issue is not conformity to rules, but concern for other people and for oneself. It seems to me as we peep into the future, that emotional self-management is likely to remain a high priority.

Negotiating Sexuality between Past and Present

What does this mean as we negotiate sexuality in the light of current understandings of what it means to be human, informed also by our engagement with tradition? Modern principles of human rights and ancient injunctions to love even one's enemy combine to underline some obvious limits. These include pederasty, as exploitation of minors; sexual abuse by professionals who take advantage of patient or client vulnerability to meet their own needs at others' expense; rape; incest, as currently defined; bestiality as exploitation of animals; sexual abuse within marriage, rarely addressed and more often condoned in contexts where rights govern marriage, or acts of

[12] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994).

adultery are the only concern; and much else. We are no longer worried about such things as not having enough fish swimming in our semen, about wasting seed, or about losing virility through too much sex. These grounds for opposing sex during menstruation and pregnancy, same-sex relations, bestiality, *coitus interruptus*, masturbation, use of contraception, seem no longer cogent, though we rule out bestiality on other grounds. The same applies, its seems to me, to the concern that all sex must be in a context where procreation is possible.

Because of generally effective contraception we are also now much less worried about conception. This has not only transformed the lives of women living in sexual relationships, producing a huge influx of women into the workforce, and providing them with the possibilities of controlling family size with all the consequences which flow from that—which is also an essential element in addressing one of the drivers of world poverty. It has also undermined one of the major foundations for the prominence given to female virginity. Sex before marriage need no longer run the risk of conception. Does remaining a virgin until marriage still have any basis in sound and careful reasoning? This therefore also removes one of the foundations for the ideal of marital fidelity, at least by wives. Is it now without foundation?

Certainly we no longer espouse the view that adultery mandates divorce or is even a necessary ground for divorce. We no longer operate with purity laws which deem a woman unclean who has slept with another man. The notion that people become one flesh by the act of sexual intercourse cannot, it seems to me, be sustained in a form that supposes an unbreakable oneness with anyone with whom one has copulated. Experience might have even persuaded Paul that this is simply not real. People change. They even repent. They begin again. This is gospel. We face the situation today where people in all genuineness come to marriage having already engaged in sexual intercourse, often with more than one partner; where marriages come to an end and people remarry; where marital crises may involve extramarital sex, but where the couple work through this to continue the relationship, perhaps even on a more healthy basis. This is our world and likely to be our world and it is in that sense very different from the world of Jesus.

Sex and Marriage

At this point some, sensing this distance, advocate, as I have noted, a cutting adrift from the ancient tradition. Or does its light still illuminate the issues? Already it undermines our preoccupation with the act of sexual intercourse by having us address attitudes. What then of marital fidelity? What then of who might marry and in what state? Our practice gives much greater attention to attitude. Readiness for marriage has less to do with the physical intactness of one partner and more to do with the emotional maturity and attitudes of each. Fundamental to this perspective is the light which shines from our tradition into such

preparations, where valuing, respecting, acknowledging, and loving are central. Similarly, when engaging the strained or broken relationship, our focus is across the breadth of human experience from attitude to act and what that has meant for each. Fidelity must mean much more than absence of adultery. My observation is that most marital relations do not cope well with relationships of similar levels of intimacy (with or without sexual intercourse) outside the marriage. The issue of sustaining a healthy relationship has, however, less to do with stopping at having sex (which is usually far too late), than with what is going on at a deeper level in the relationship.

To some extent this may be no different from what happens among the unmarried, not least in the extended period of dating, which is so different from what our traditions envisaged. The concerns beyond those, that is with each of the two in such a relationship, are with any who are dependent on them and the stability they provide, so that with good reason we have protected such partnerships legally. The situation has been additionally complicated by our having applied that legal status of marriage to any such partnership, inevitable in a pre-contraceptive era, including where it has no intention of producing and nurturing offspring. The issue of whether it makes sense to recognize such as marriage is not unlike the issue of whether to embrace gay marriage, though for the latter there seem to be very good grounds, at least where the purpose is to provide a nurturing family.

As far as remaining chaste before marriage is concerned, whether for a man or a woman, the issue takes on a different shape where fear of pregnancy has been removed. It has already taken on a different shape in practice. One might continue to insist—with very little ground—on premarital chastity, or one might effectively abdicate responsibility and leave young people to find their own way. Many do it surprisingly well and develop their own codes of what it means to discredit oneself. The alternative is to embrace an understanding which sees one of the important learnings of adolescence as having to do with negotiating boundaries in relations with others in ways that harm neither yourself nor others. This has to include sex, but include more than sex. How do I relate to another person in a way that I do not sell myself or them short? What are the risks and rules of intimacy? How do I learn how to handle the powerful urges which are in my sexuality? We are probably doing more good for humanity by helping young people address these issues than we would be by insisting on premarital chastity, though the result may well end up being the same in many instances. The counterargument is that in times of such turbulence absolute prohibitions are an anchor.

Same-Sex Relations

I am not persuaded that we yet have the science to declare that some people are born with homosexual orientation, but our world presents us with many people for whom this appears to be the case or

who find themselves for whatever reason now having this as their natural orientation. What weight does one give to this very strong evidence? Those closest to the experience, including in families, have no doubt and see the demand that such people should remain celibate all their life, simply because some people deem what Paul wrote and Leviticus prescribed as infallible divine decree, as gross injustice. I think it also imposes on those ancient authors inappropriate authority which on other issues we are happy not to cede to them. The hermeneutical escape of proponents of the hardline, namely that we can only disagree with scripture when it, itself, displays tensions, such as on slavery and women, is a strategy of despair to prop up what the biblical light of love exposes as another instance where attitudes and assessments must necessarily change.

There is no disputing the wrongness of deliberately perverting one's sexual orientation, not to speak of pederasty and homosexual rape (such as Sodom depicts). One may also agree with Paul that excessive passion can well produce distortions and perversions. Nor need we deny that some are simply holding onto a stage of their adolescence, when they were perhaps pressured to "come out" and, instead of experiencing it as a common phase to be lived through and left behind, felt they must be bound to it permanently. Adolescence in matters sexual, whether homosexual or heterosexual, has a way of perpetuating itself for decades. The issue is the person who finds himself or herself so oriented and who seeks fulfilment of sexual intimacy with another. The wider community, including its wisest, has made the transition to this insight over the past three to four decades with considerable maturity, but there is still more maturity to come. The church is still in transition. Who knows how soon a more embracing stance will appear. Movement will occur, I think at three levels: as those with firm opinions engage the biblical tradition more carefully; as more people in congregations come to share the best wisdom of the wider community; and as more genuinely homosexual people shine and become their own best evidence, not least in living with the cruel prejudice and well-meaning disapproval of those who cannot gainsay Paul.

Where to from Here?

I have chosen to focus on the issues of sexuality more familiar to most, leaving much unsaid about the rest, including economic exploitation of sex whether through pornography or prostitution, including the sex trade and effective slavery; issues of nudity in practice and art; abortion, surrogacy, fertility treatments, opposition to contraception, undoing the mistake of a celibate priesthood, and much more. I acknowledge that for some the reaffirmation of ancient prohibitions provides stability and security in a constantly changing world where human reassessments rarely escape human foibles and fallibilities. I am not persuaded that the old cloth is adequate to mend the new patches, though, if I may play with the symbols,

I think the old wine is more than worth preserving. I have argued, indeed, that there are insights embedded in our ancient heritage which actually do us good service in deconstructing its own strictures which survive on its ancient landscape and enable us to rebuild on our own, sometimes reaffirming the old, sometimes of necessity reconstructing to incorporate new materials which new knowledge and life experience bring. The future is then best served, neither in re-erecting ancient tents and tenets, nor in bulldozing the past into oblivion, but in engaging and embracing our tradition, as much as we do in our liturgies and sacred rites and sermons, to remain connected to what drives and inspires them, and that, not as nostalgia, but in the faith that the God who meets us when we are most in touch with love calls us into the future with hope. Then the future of Christianity is likely to be also good news for sexuality, a goal its story has but rarely achieved.

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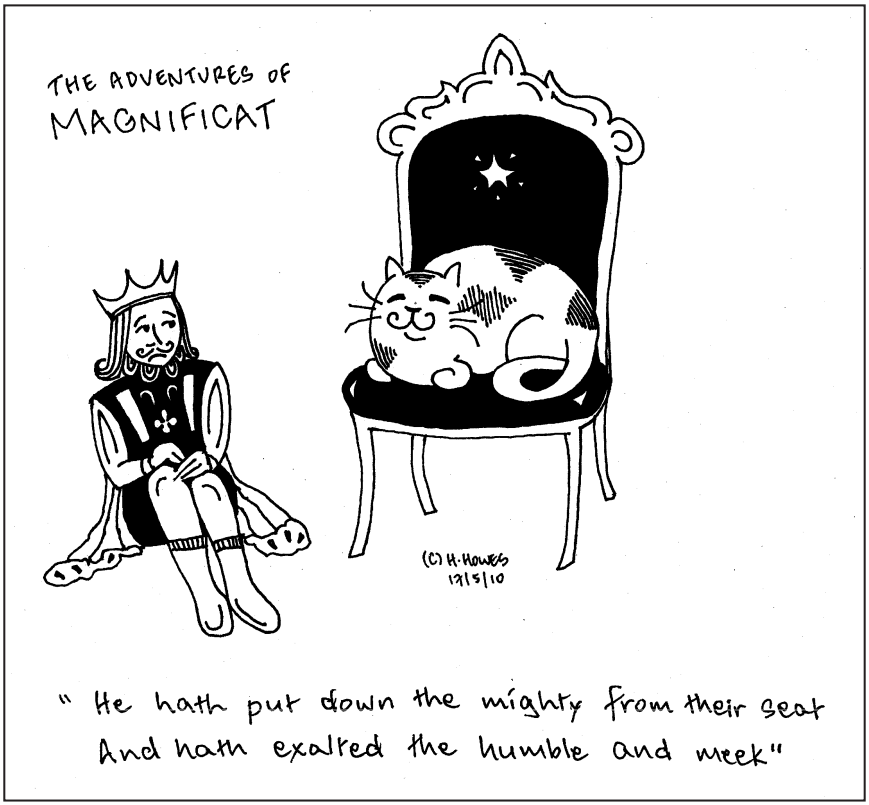

what are you reading?

Ezekiel · by Robert W. Jenson · reviewed by Martin Wright
Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible · Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009

These days it is customary to pay at least lip-service to the idea that biblical and systematic theology ought to be more "integrated" with one another, and that traditional disciplinary boundaries do more harm than good. But it is a problem more easily identified than solved. There have been many well-intentioned attempts at "theological exegesis" in recent years, but I have come across few that really succeed. Too often the biblical text becomes merely a *pre*text for theological discussion that interests the author—it's rare to see a disciplined engagement with the text, making full use of the historical-critical toolkit without being constrained by it, that results in the *renewal* of theological thought. If the encounter with the text doesn't change our minds, one wonders whether we have really been doing exegesis at all.

Among the champions of this cause is Brazos Press, which is currently issuing a series of commentaries written by theologians who are not biblical specialists. Contributors include Jaroslav Pelikan (Acts), Stanley Hauerwas (Matthew) and R. R. Reno (Genesis). I have not read enough to make a general comment about the series' success in doing "theological exegesis", but I can recommend the ninth instalment, published last year, Robert Jenson's *Ezekiel*. Jenson's only previous foray into biblical commentary is Interpretation's *Song of Songs*,[1] in response to an invitation which he admits took him by surprise:

> "Every systematic theologian", [the series editors] said, "should write biblical commentary at the end of his career". And that was indeed once the tradition: first systematic, then biblical study. Even Thomas Aquinas' monumental *Summa Theologicae* was intended as mere preparation for meditation on Scripture. (vii)

Later in the same volume, he remarks that "a brief commentary provides no space to develop the doctrine of Trinity, unless it were a commentary on Ezekiel or John's Gospel" (78). With this in mind, and knowing that anything by Jenson is guaranteed to be electrifying reading, I awaited his *Ezekiel* eagerly. Does it live up to this promise, and does it successfully negotiate an "interdisciplinary" path?

The answer is much more "yes" than "no". This is an exciting and unsettling commentary on an important text. Jenson reads Ezekiel as Christian scripture, consistently and unapologetically, locating himself within the church's ancient interpretive tradition. He draws on patristic, medieval and modern Christian

[1] Louisville: John Knox, 2005.

exegetes, at the same time engaging in genuine conversation with Jewish commentary, both ancient and modern. (I recommend this volume to anyone who has been persuaded that a Christian theological reading of the Old Testament must necessarily be supersessionist.)

Ezekiel is a book much neglected by us liberal moderns—how much of it, apart from chapters 1 and 37, is really familiar? In fact we find it simply too hard, and this commentary emphasizes rather than mitigates the scandal of the text. In a church that is under the discipline of scripture, we can't afford to either shun or eviscerate the tricky bits, but facing up to them honestly is a dangerous task. So in his Introduction, Jenson warns:

> Attention to a text can turn into experience of its matter, and the judgments and promises of God as given through Ezekiel are so extreme that they can easily undo ordinary religiosity—to say nothing of the disastrous spiritual adventures that might be ignited by his visions. (30)

The prophet is mercilessly critical of comfortable and domesticated religion—including our own, as Jenson is never slow to point out. That makes this commentary a confronting and demanding read, prompting serious theological self-examination. Intellectually curious Christians should welcome the challenge, but tackle it advisedly.

One example of such "deep waters" is the shocking claim in 20:25f that God is somehow an *agent provocateur* in Israel's rebellion: "I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live … in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord". Jenson comments:

> Surely we must at least acknowledge that modern theology's frequent picture of God as transparently good and kind cannot be squared with scripture … His ways to his purposes for us are devious, at least by any standard of straightforwardness available to the fallen and redeemed creatures who actually exist and can worry about such things. (159)

It's hardly fair to quote this out of its context in an extensive and searching discussion, but it gives the flavour.

The historical criticism in this commentary is basically secondhand. Jenson makes good critical use of it and the result is a persuasive reading, but that is not quite the same thing as the organic union of exegetical, historical and dogmatic expertise. Perhaps this is simply too much to ask (though I think Francis Watson achieves it in his work on Paul). Readers of the whole commentary will be annoyed by numerous small repetitions, but this is a minor quibble.

After the comment in *Song of Songs*, I had hoped to find a developed trinitarian argument in this *Ezekiel*. It is half there—Jenson is wholly convincing in his "incarnational" reading of Ezekiel's God. I was disappointed not to find more explicit pneumatology; but this probably says more about my preconceptions than the commentary's actual merits, which are great. In summary, it is highly recommended, but not to be taken up lightly.

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