

## CHAPTER X SPIRITUAL READING OF SCRIPTURE

All throughout its history the Judeo-Christian tradition has lived with Scripture as a way of hearing God and encountering the realities of the spiritual life. This is well expressed in Hebrews:

The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely: it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing can hide from him; everything is uncovered and open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account of ourselves.<sup>473</sup>

With the development of modern scientific methodology and historical criticism in the last two hundred years, this literature, bearer of the life and experience of God's people, has been subjected to objective and critical examination. Though this has made invaluable contributions to our knowledge about the text, it often separates the gathering of information about the text from the life-realities and experience of the Transcendent which the text incarnates or reflects. It also separates the gatherer of the information from the text in the natural distancing which results from analysis and explanation. It is not that historical critical methodology has no significant contribution to make. It aids us in understanding by enabling us to step into the times and, to some extent, the mind of the author and it helps avoid misunderstanding by setting some objective limits to our attempts to probe both the historical meaning and the contemporary message of the text. It does not, however, guarantee understanding because the meaning of the text is not the historical information itself, but the movement of communication from author to recipients which embodies the experience and intent of the author and seeks to address the experience and concerns of the recipients. We also need to recognize that there are dynamics within communication transcendent to the full awareness of those involved and this is particularly true if we believe that God is involved in the communication.

Walter Wink and Brevard Childs have been at the forefront of a movement that has recognized the limitations of historical-critical study. In Wink's landmark work on *The Bible In Human Transformation* he spoke of the "bankruptcy" of the historical-critical method.<sup>474</sup> He did not mean that this method was of no value, but that by itself it is only a historical enterprise and does not nourish or transform the lives of individuals or Christian communities. For the sake of Christian faith and life one cannot stop there. We teach our churches what Scripture is for by how we use, teach and preach Scripture. Within our use of Scripture lies the possibility of a change of paradigm for its use by those to whom we minister.

Brevard Childs, in his work *The New Testament As Canon: An Introduction* argues for a canonical approach: <sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup>. Hebrews 4:12-13, The Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>474</sup>. Walter Wink, *The Bible In Human Transformation*, Phila.: Fortress Press, 1973. See also his leader's guide in the use of his method: *Transforming Bible Study*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1980.

<sup>475</sup>. Brevard Childs, *The New Testament As Canon: An Introduction*, Phila.: Fortress, 1985. Child's earlier work on *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1970) expresses his concern regarding a disillusionment with biblical theology and its lack of relationship to what is experienced in life's reality.

...the historical critical Introduction - whether in a liberal or conservative form is irrelevant - has not done justice in interpreting the New Testament in its function as authoritative, canonical literature of both an historical and a contemporary Christian community of faith and practice. A special dynamic issues from its canonical function which is not exhausted by either literary or historical analysis, but calls for a theological description of its shape and function. Crucial to the point is that the descriptive and hermeneutical task of interpretation cannot be held apart, as if to determine what a text meant and what it means could be neatly isolated.

Another way of stating the issue is to propose that what is needed is a new vision of the biblical text which does justice not only to the demands of a thoroughly post-Enlightenment age, but also to the confessional stance of the Christian faith for which the sacred scriptures provide a true and faithful vehicle for understanding the will of God. .... The theological issue turns on the Christian church's claim for the integrity of a special reading which interprets the Bible within an established theological context and toward a particular end, namely the discerning of the will of God, which is constitutive of the hermeneutical function of canon.<sup>476</sup>

This will be for many not only a way of allowing the New Testament to speak to the contemporary church, but a new way of looking at the New Testament. The books are seen not merely in their individuality, but in their being together. "By collecting and reordering of once independent writings into an authoritative corpus of scripture, a new dynamic was established which profoundly influenced the interpretation of the parts ..." <sup>477</sup> The motivation of this construal of the books was to render "the tradition in such a way as for its message of the Gospel to be accessible to every succeeding generation of Christians." "Yet the canonical scriptures do not serve as a frozen deposit of tradition or doctrine, but a living vehicle through which the will of God is perceived. The hermeneutical task of interpreting scripture requires also an act of construal on the part of the reader. The interaction between text and reader comprises every true interpretation." <sup>478</sup>

Another movement away from the historical-critical method, though incorporating its results, is a rebirth of literary criticism since the 1970's, well expressed in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode.<sup>479</sup> Their answer to the reasons for their approach is stated thus:

First of all, the Bible, considered as a book, achieves its effects by means no different from those generally employed by written language. This is true whatever our reasons for attributing value to it - as the report of God's action in history, as the founding text of a religion or religions, as a guide to ethics, as evidence about people and societies in the remote past, and so on. Indeed, literary analysis must come first, for unless we have a sound understanding of what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other respects. It has been said that the best reason for the serious study of the Bible - for learning how to read it well - is written across the history of Western culture: see what happens when people misread it, read it badly, or read it on false assumptions. ....

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<sup>476</sup>. Childs, pp. 36-37

<sup>477</sup>. Childs, p. 38

<sup>478</sup>. Childs, p. 40

<sup>479</sup>. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U. Press, 1987.

What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated. This development has not been simple or single, and it has not been merely a reaction against the modern tradition of professional scholarship. It comes of a need, felt by clerical and secular students alike, to achieve a new accommodation with the Bible as it is, which is to say, as literature of high importance and power.<sup>480</sup>

The results of this approach are apparent in the last paragraph of the treatment of Jonah:

The prayer sung in the belly of the great fish provides the key to the story's genre. What appears to be a supplication for help becomes a song of thanksgiving as it is sung by a man descending toward Sheol. When the song's piety becomes sickeningly sweet or unwittingly perceptive ("Salvation is of the Lord"), the prophet is vomited onto dry land just as he is about to hit the sea bottom. Such a scene is close to farce; since the story is also quite serious, however, I would argue that satire is a more appropriate designation of genre. There is no evidence of cultural contact between the writer and the classical satire that was probably evolving in other parts of the Mediterranean world at the time. But it does seem to give the modern reader the most useful handle on the story. In satire we find incongruous, distorted events; a mixture of literary genres; an image of violence at the heart of the story; journeys as typical settings; and relatively little emphasis on plot or character development. The author of Jonah has skillfully used irony in order to distance us from the hero while also keeping the story on its narrow path between invective and farce.<sup>481</sup>

The primary purpose of most Scripture in its origin and integration into the canon was in some way to facilitate relationship with and love for God, and to enable life appropriate to this relationship. In the spiritual hungers of our time there has been a revival of interest in spiritual or devotional reading which seeks to allow Scripture to function in this way. One can find this in the extensive use of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which largely consists of an imaginative reliving of the events of Jesus' life through the Gospel narratives, the extensive use of the Benedictine method of praying Scripture, and in the writings of such as Susan Muto of the Institute of Formative Spirituality. Dr. Muto has published a trilogy on spiritual reading and in her *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading* provides not only guidelines as to methodology, but reading programs on three themes basic to spirituality: "Living the Desert Experience"; "Here I Am, Send Me; and "Stepping Aside and Starting Again." The *Practical Guide* also provides a valuable annotated bibliography of the literature of spirituality.<sup>482</sup> Though in this chapter we are dealing particularly with the spiritual reading of Scripture, Muto reminds us of the wealth of spiritual literature which may also nourish our lives and for which the methods for the spiritual reading of Scripture may be similarly used.

### **Methods of Spiritual Reading**

Two methods which the reader may find helpful follow. The first is an approach, similar to that of the Ignatian Exercises and Francis de Sales' recommended "mental prayer", which makes use of the

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480. Ibid., pp. 2 and 4.

481. Ibid., p. 242.

482. Susan Annette Muto, *Approaching the Sacred*, Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1973.

*Steps Along the Way: The Path of Spiritual Reading*, Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1975.

*The Journey Homeward: On the Road of Spiritual Reading*, Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1977.

*A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading*, Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976.

imagination and its ability to form images. This lends itself particularly to those passages of Scripture which may be imagined. The second, the Benedictine method, lends itself to all of Scripture and is helpful to those who may prefer to reflect on the words of Scripture rather than the images of Scripture.

### Meditative Exercise Using Imaging

As part of daily devotions take at least one-half hour for meditation on the listed episodes of Jesus life at a time of the day when free from distractions.

#### Passages:

Day 1: Mark 1:1-11 The Baptism

Day 2: Mark 1:12-13 The Temptation (This account of the Temptation is very brief and will leave a great deal to the imagination and what you remember from the other accounts.)

Day 3: Mark 1:14-20 The Call of Disciples

Day 4: Mark 1:21-28 Exorcism in Capernaum Synagogue

Day 5: Mark 1:29-39 Healings

Day 6: Mark 1:40-45 Healing of Leper

Day 7: Mark 2:1-12 The Paralytic

#### Method

1. Have paper and pencil or your journal at hand so that you can note any significant elements of your experience after the meditation is over.
2. Take a moment to become aware of yourself and of your needs. You might wish to write down one or two elements of your present situation which come to mind.
3. Read over the passage slowly to familiarize yourself with it. Think for a few moments about what this passage means according to your knowledge of the life of Jesus and the Gospels. Then allow this information to move to the periphery of your mind.
4. Place yourself in a comfortable position for meditation so that you can be comfortable and relaxed, but yet maintain attention. In a brief prayer offer this time of meditation to God for his/her using.
5. Close your eyes and "enter" your time of meditation. This will involve allowing your body to relax and your mind to slow its activity. Even though you have thought of some elements of your present situation and have thought of the historical meaning of the text, place this at the periphery of your mental vision and try to allow a space to "clear" in your mind in which the meditation can develop. It is sometimes helpful to focus attention of your breathing for a while so that your mind has something to give attention to. The rate of your breathing is also a good indication of relaxation, so that you will have some clue to your relaxation as your breathing slows.
6. Recall briefly the main features of the story in the text. **Then stop your active role and allow the setting of the scene and its story to develop in your imagination.** Do not create the story, but allow your mind and God to create the story for you. You will need to develop your inner senses of observation. PAY ATTENTION to what you see, hear, smell. You may even want to touch objects in the scene. Your relationship to the story as it develops may be one of OBSERVER or PARTICIPANT. You will need to decide whether you want to watch, or be there in the scene and perhaps experience the role of one of the characters in the story.
7. When the story has run its course, find some place at the edge of the scene in your imagination where you can sit down and discuss your experience with Jesus. Do not create the conversation, but allow it to develop around what you have "seen" or experienced.
8. Conclude your dialogue with Jesus and remain for a time in silence with him, enjoying and

experiencing the relationship.

9. Gradually return from the biblical scene to the present and open your eyes. It may be helpful to tell yourself that you will do this and that you will come out of your meditation refreshed, remembering the insights you have gained.

10. Jot down any insights gained.

### Benedictine Method - Lectio Divina

This devotional approach to Scripture has been associated with St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality, though it really is earlier. It uses a "ladder" of four steps which provide it with a broad appeal. It may be used with the Bible or with other devotional literature.

#### *Lectio* (Reading)

Read the passage, paying special attention to words and phrases to which you intuitively respond. I would suggest first reading the passage through rapidly and then going back and reading very slowly, stopping with phrases or words which "draw" you.

#### *Meditatio* (Meditation)

Here welcome the words that have drawn you into your life and "chew" upon them as a cow chews a cud, i.e. mentally say them over and over again until your mind becomes saturated with them. Another method might be to mentally focus upon them and hold them in the center of the mind for a while.

#### *Oratio* (Prayer)

This prayer is in the form of a spontaneous dialogue with God or Jesus about these words and what they might mean to you, and how they might be incorporated into your heart.

#### *Contemplatio* (Contemplation)

Contemplation means directly turning one's attention to God, without the use of words and images, in silence: a loving silence before God. Relationship with God is the ultimate purpose of all devotional exercises.

If portions of the passage still remain after the words on which the Meditation was made, then one might go back and continue in the passage to the next words that attracted one, repeating the above process. It is also helpful to keep the results of this process in a diary or journal.

### **How Scripture Speaks**

How is it that Scriptures authored centuries ago can speak a message to us today and that this message may become the word of God for us?

To answer this it is important to keep in mind that the meanings embodied in Scripture are far more complex than "what some author said to some persons in ancient times." When one recognizes the complexity of the possible meanings of Scripture, one's mind (and heart) may then be more receptive to what may happen. Scripture may contain all of the following:

1. There is something that the author intends. This may be more or less related to the author's understanding of God, faith and life. The author will not always deal with "central" matters, but at times the peripheral matters necessitated by the situation. The author also expresses concerns and gives advice within the cultural context and in terms of its issues. Thus the specifics of a passage may or may not be

resonant with the needs and issues of contemporary life faced by the interpreter and may not be God's word to the present. Though much of the material is written to a specific historical context, some truths and situations are much the same at any historical period. Thus the intended meaning of some words may speak to one's life and needs while others may sound foreign to our time and interests.

2. The author who intends something in the text and who expresses here something of God or life is an author who has a life history and personal experience beyond what was said in a concrete moment in history in the text. The text may lead to an encounter with the person of the author beyond the particular text or the broader history behind the text. This may be true wherever Scripture has provided us with extended information about a person or period of history so that an individual passage becomes catalyst to insights and information contained elsewhere. It may also occur when the text in a more symbolic and mystical way creates contact with the life of the person whose experience it expresses.

3. The text reflects more than the subject matter the author intends. It reflects his/her experience of God, of him/herself, of human existence, of others, of the world, of history --- and all of these as interacting elements of a process of which the author may not be completely conscious.

4. The text often reflects a process undergone before the text became Scripture. For example, the different endings added to the Gospel of Mark make us suspicious of modifications and interpretations introduced into the body of Mark. The modifications seem to change portions of Mark with which later segments of the church did not agree: e.g. Jesus' reinterpretation of his mission in the perspective of the Isaianic Suffering Servant, Jesus' rejection of eschatological speculation, problems in the interpretation of chapter 4 on parables and the introduction of an interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (the addition of interpretation to the materials is unusual for Mark, though very common in Matthew's use of Mark. This in Mark we meet the original perspectives of Mark and later modifications. When interpreting Mark we enter into the stream of the early church's interpretive process. In John the editor in 21:24 mentions one of his written sources and by his openness helps us to see him as responsible for the final form of the Gospel which modifies the dualism of the Johannine community. Chapter 5 on the Feeding of the 5000 seems to contain a series of short sermons on the Feeding, each moving beyond the meaning of the other. Luke likely wrote an earlier form of the Gospel to which Acts was companion (Acts ends in 62 CE). The present Gospel, a later edition, modifies the theology of Acts with which Luke later came to disagree. In the Pastorals, especially in I Timothy, one finds clear signs of later additions. Even in I Cor. 11 and 14 the material on women seems to come from a later hand and is really interruptive of the text.

That the text represents a process instead of a single literary production is a crucial factor in its interpretation, as is the pre-literary process implied in the Synoptic materials.

5. Beyond what the text meant historically is what the text comes to mean as it is taken seriously and responded to. Though one cannot confuse this with the historical meaning of the text, what the text gives birth to does become part of the meaning of the text. Theologically one can understand this as the ongoing activity of the Spirit in the "creative remembrance" of the text, a process which Jesus's words in John 16:12-15 define and which is explicitly referred to in John 2:22 and 12:16.

6. As modern students of language have pointed out, language preexists the person who uses it and to some extent brings with it a wealth of previous experience about the subjects of its concern. Thus it may bring to us perceptions of existence beyond its user's intention.

7. Then there is that mysterious phenomenon of hearing or reading words and suddenly some of them leap to life because what has been going on in one's life longs to be named, to be given words by which to be

understood. Here the text has little to do with the author's reality, but gives expression to our own. Thus the words of the author become words naming what is within our psyche and life, having nothing at all to do with their historical intent. This may happen as a purely human process, but God may also be in it.

8. Lastly, there is the fact that God seeks to relate to us and may use any of the above for God's purposes. When this happens, then the meanings which arise out of Scripture become God's present "Word" to us in the best Reformation sense. Our faith in the reality of the Spirit, witnessed to in the biblical traditions, calls upon us to look for God's contemporary involvement in our lives and messages to us.

### **Varieties of Hermeneutic**

Hermeneutic derives from a Greek word which in its verbal form means "to interpret". It has particularly come to mean the perspectives and principles of one's approach to interpretation. There is hermeneutical theory of various kinds which is very self-conscious about methods of interpretation. But there is also the less self-conscious hermeneutic which brings to Scripture concerns and presuppositions that affect what is looked for in Scripture and the results of interpretation. Even if we do not have specific concerns that we bring to Scripture, our culture and personal history cause us to come to Scripture in characteristic ways.

The Apostle Paul expresses his need to be sensitive to a variety of hermeneutics:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law - not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ - that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak. that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.<sup>483</sup>

It is important to recognize that this was not purely an accommodation to the difficulties of understanding between cultures, but an attempt to allow the Gospel to address each culture, and those who lived within it, on their own terms. That the "weak" are also included means that Paul considered in his style of presentation not only cultural differences, but those "with limited understanding about the full implications of the Gospel," which is what he meant by the "weak." The very variety embodied within the New Testament testifies to this multi-contextual expressing of the Gospel, though few were as self-conscious about this as Paul.

Contextualization should then be expected to occur in every context where it has permission, and surreptitiously in those contexts where it does not. In our day the historical understanding of Scripture has helped to facilitate this by making us aware of Scripture's contexts and ours. Though in some sense contextualization is always a "reading into" Scripture, the primary question is whether the reading into is drawing upon the richness of the texts and what they symbolize or whether it is the introduction of something completely foreign. However, the introduction of something foreign into the text is nothing new either. It has been happening since the early church. One only has to examine Matthew's handling of Jesus' sayings compared to the way these sayings appear in Luke. The Beatitudes social concern in Luke 6 is spiritualized in Matt. 5, and the petition for the Kingdom in the Luke 11 version of the Lord's Prayer is explained by the synonymous parallelism "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". The prophetic

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483. I Cor. 9:20-23.

voice has disappeared from Jesus' sayings as they were used in Matthew towards the end of the first century.<sup>484</sup>

What this leads to is the recognition that the hermeneutic which we take to Scripture becomes an important element in its interpretation and that the variety of hermeneutics which have arisen today should not surprise us, but enrich us.

I usually tell students that they should not graduate from seminary without familiarizing themselves, in some detail, with at least one other world religion. They must have something to see their perspectives "over against" to understand them and to have their own perspectives qualified. I think that this is also true of hermeneutics. We need the recognition that we come to Scripture with our biases, which it is important to identify for ourselves, and then we need to explore several other approaches to appreciate the value and biases of our own, and to broaden our understanding of what Scripture can mean -- and even "what in Scripture is injurious to your health".<sup>485</sup>

Most of us are acquainted with the "pietistic" interpretation of Scripture which focused on individual salvation. Many today have come to accept that hermeneutic which now sees in the Bible the basis for social action. We have gone through the period of the existentialist hermeneutic, largely based in the later or earlier philosophy of Heidegger (Bultmann for example). We have become conscious of black hermeneutic and feminine hermeneutic. Liberation theology, both in such forms as the works of Moltmann and the Latin American theologians, has made us aware of varieties of liberation hermeneutic.<sup>486</sup> For some time we have been aware of a psychological hermeneutic, particularly among those who follow the paradigm of Carl Jung. John Sanford's works are an important source of this, but it is interesting to look at Jung's own interpretation of the Biblical materials in his *Answer to Job*.<sup>487</sup>

Recently I was involved in a study on AIDS in the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches. Within our study group we had persons from the Metropolitan Community Church, a church ministering especially to the homosexual community, and one person who was living with AIDS. It is very clear that there is also a homosexual hermeneutic and a hermeneutic for those communities struggling with AIDS.

What has often come out of both the theological hermeneutic of the church,<sup>488</sup> before the development of historical criticism, and later the historical-critical hermeneutic has been the feeling that somehow the right interpretations could be arrived at and then protected from error when attained. When one observes

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484. Granted, we can't be sure of the forms in which the sayings came to the Matthaean community nor can we be absolutely sure that Luke's form of similar sayings is closer to the original intent, which is what is presumed here.

485. A phrase used by Letty Russell in a conversation in a Faith and Order Commission, NCCC, meeting; a phrase which I have come to value. This presumes the same sort of selective hermeneutic which Jesus used when he chose some perspectives and rejected others in the Old Testament, or the selectivity which the Gospel writers used as they chose what to include in their Gospels from the Jesus tradition.

486. I want to call attention to Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Phila.: Westminster Press, 1985; the works of Phyllis Trible, especially *Texts of Terror*, Phila.: Fortress, 1984, Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad, 1983. Robert M. Brown's *Unexpected News* is helpful for the third world perspective. One can pick up the various works of black or liberation theologians to appreciate their perspective. Daniel Migliore, in *Called To Freedom*, Phil.: Westminster, 1980, has a helpful chapter on "Scripture As Liberating Word".

487. See John Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings*, NY: Paulist Press, 1970; also Carl G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, transl. by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1973, see especially pp. 73ff.

488. Though there was a historical critique of sorts in the early church and there were the critical methods of rhetorics in the ancient world, by and large the critical principles used before the 18th century were theological.

the variety of theological traditions and the variety of interpretation in commentaries espousing the historical-critical method, it becomes clear that such never happened, except as various schools and churches held to the view that they had the correct understanding. It is true, however, that historical studies and discoveries have contributed greatly to our understanding of Scripture, though not drawing scholars into a concensus.

What should come out of the recognition of many hermeneutics and their varied results is a recognition that although truth is embodied in Scripture, we may profit more from the struggle for truth and the journey towards truth than thinking we have arrived at our goal. What this means is that since understanding correctly is not the attainable goal in any absolute sense, we are freed to explore Scripture and do not need always to understand correctly. Zinzendorf within the Moravian tradition had the helpful understanding that matters of salvation were clear in Scripture and available to all, while there were those matters that required knowledge and the expert. Here there were differences of opinion, though solutions to understanding might be arrived at. Then there were the "mysteries", materials and ideas which were not treated in Scripture in such a way as to have adequate definition. The "mysteries" one might interpret privately, but should not publically push one's interpretations. Also, the essence of Scripture was not conceptual, but the person of the Saviour; and ultimately Scripture was not a place to gain correct ideas, but the sacristy in which to meet the Saviour.<sup>489</sup>

This also means that Scripture belongs to the non-expert as well as the expert. The problem with historical-critical study is that it became another elitism, taking Scripture away from the people in the name of scholarship. Certainly the people will misunderstand, but so do the scholars. This is not saying that there is not an important place for scholarship, but it must not take the Bible out of the lives of the people. Amazing things have happened in the Latin American base communities as people with a limited education have studied Scripture.

Lastly, this means that if we do not hear the varieties of understanding raised by the many hermeneutics used with Scripture, our vision of Scripture's possibilities is too narrow, and we must be careful that our narrowness does not become a means of oppression.

### **Understanding Scripture and Its Authority**

At this time it is important to present a theology concerning the nature of Scripture and its authority by which our use of Scripture may be informed. If taken seriously, for many this will involve a paradigm change which may be difficult because of the weight of our theological traditions and our personal needs for an authoritative and clear revelation. It may also place us out of synch with those whom we serve and the religious communities to which we are responsible. However, besides the need to be gently faithful to truth, such a new paradigm may offer a way of making Scripture and Christian truth meaningful to many and hence serve an apologetic purpose.<sup>490</sup> It also offers the interpreter of Scripture an understanding of the complex field of interpretation within which he or she stands.

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<sup>489</sup>. A discussion of Zinzendorf's understanding of Scripture is available in a chapter on "Scripture" in my unpublished manuscript, "A Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf."

<sup>490</sup>. The Scripture is our primal authority and we believe that God has participated in its origin, though we may have difficulty in agreeing as to the nature of its "in-spiration". Though the scholar or clergyperson may find themselves in agreement with what is being said here, it has to be recognized that in some contexts the authority of the "BOOK" is crucial. This may be experienced in dealing with other religions which also claim a written revelation or in contexts within the United States affected by fundamentalism or biblical literalism. Though such perspectives are difficult to change, as are all our valued perspectives, it may be helpful to use an "incarnational" approach to the Bible, seeing it after the analogy of the "Word" in John

The Christian faith is beset by the problems inherent in being a historical religion. It claims *eternal* truths and values, yet affirms its *historical* nature by confessing a history which became embodied in Holy Scriptures (salvation history from Abraham to Christ, the life of Christ, and the history of the Spirit in the early church). The church's confession of history is complicated by the variety of responses and traditions which arose out of that history so that the church's experience with variety and its inclusion within the canon ultimately made it impossible to identify eternal truth and values with any singular expression of it. *The development of historical criticism has reconfronted the church with the variety it originally embraced in the development of the canon.*

The church in its on-going proclamation and application of its truth and values then has to contend not only with the variety in its present context, but the variety of its tradition. It needs then to find some way of sorting out and affirming that which is "eternal", formulating faith statements in a variety of contemporary contexts, and working on ethical issues complicated by lack of unambiguous guidance from its tradition.

One solution to sorting out the eternal from the contingent is to listen seriously to what the Bible says about God as "person". Person transcends all actions and expressions and remains a constant entity behind one's experience of him/her. Consistency is to be found in the person experienced and in the covenants and commitments which the person promises. Changing historical contexts do not change the presence and commitments of the person. Thus God enters into relationship within the framework of covenants with Abraham and Moses and redefines and clarifies the nature of relationship/covenant in Christ. The name "Yahweh", given in the Exodus experience, emphasizes God's consistent presence ("I am" or "I will be") and the name revealed in the New Testament ("Abba", "Father") emphasizes the caring and dependable nature of God's relationship. The giving of the Spirit clarifies that the relationship with God is not distant (a relationship with a God "up there"), but present in human experience. The first and second commandments of the Decalogue then affirm the uniqueness of God and that God must be recognized to transcend all images, attempts to explain and describe. Only God is God.

In the practical process of formulating faith and ethical decisions, one needs to find a way of proceeding. It seems to me that there are two primary foci that are helpful, and a third that becomes especially

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1:1-18 which became incarnate in an historical form. Thus God chooses to use human, historical, culturally conditioned expression as a way of communicating to peoples in the concrete realities of their context. One may also speak of the Canon, and not just the text of books, as inspired. If God participated in the development of the Canon, then God intended individual books and their teachings to have a different meaning in relationship to other books than they would have individually. Thus, for example, the message of Revelation and of the Pastorals must be seen in relationship to other perspectives. Revelation then adds an emphasis within the canon, but its canonical message is different from its message if it stood alone. The theology behind the selection and arrangement of the biblical books is somewhat difficult to attain because it is more implied than expressed. In dealing with Revelation, one must ask why it is placed last and why the Gospels are placed first within the New Testament. One must also explore its difficulty in being included within the Canon. The meaning of the Old Testament must be explored within the early church's struggle over its meaning and inclusion. In dealing with the formation of the Canon it may be helpful to see Christ as the center to which the canonical literature is drawn, and thus the Gospels are placed at the center in the total Canon.

Though it is important to be sensitive to those who need an authority in a "book", it is also important to recognize the significant role of historical criticism in the formation of contemporarily relevant theological positions. Women, particularly, have much at stake in the critical appraisal of the patriarchal bias of many of the biblical materials.

An interesting treatment of the struggle over inerrancy in American Evangelicalism is given in Fuller Seminary's new publication *In Trust: "Fuller's Battle for the Bible: Bidding Farewell to Inerrancy,"* by George Marsden, adapted from the final chapter of his *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* published in 1987. See *In Trust*, Easter 1989, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 8-15.

important as the church relates to the world in which it lives and bears witness. The first is to analyze the dialogical relationship of Spirit (the active presence of God) and tradition (the deposits from previous experience of God and reflection upon such experience). The second is to examine creation (or "general revelation") as a source of knowledge. Creation has long been felt to disclose information supportive of and supplementary to "special revelation". As tradition is in a dialogical relationship with Spirit, so the religious traditions about creation need to be in dialogue with new scientific studies, which also disclose the nature of creation, and with God as God leads us to understand creation in the light of this. The third is to be in dialogue with other religious traditions in which God has evidently also been active. Here it is important to remember that Eastern and Western religious traditions may approach spiritual reality from differing perspectives, so we should not too quickly say God has not been active within them because they do not utilize what we identify as a Christian perspective.

### Spirit and Tradition

The role of the Spirit, affirmed in most of the New Testament traditions, has implications that are often neglected. Usually the Spirit is relegated to the role of inspirer and interpreter of tradition already established -- or the creative impulse of early Christianity which is thought not to be active in the same way since the days of the apostles or the early councils. In this way all authority is always placed within the tradition. On the other hand, if taken seriously, the "Spirit" means that things are never settled and the church is continuously engaged in rethinking in the light of God's engagement with the present age. One must respect the tradition, but cannot idolize it in any form. *Only God is God and God keeps on being God by not abdicating to the tradition.*

The biblical tradition may be seen as follows: The divergent traditions of Judaism which bear witness to God and God's relationship to life are converged, clarified and evaluated in terms of a unique action of God in history in Christ. However, this self-disclosure of God is itself rendered ambiguous and multiform by the humanly and culturally-conditioned perceptions of those who witnessed it, bore witness, and transmitted this witness. *Though "God in Christ" is an unambiguous reality, its perception is not.* It was then left to the church, under the guidance of the ongoing activity of God (the Spirit), to do three things:

- 1) to clarify the misconceptions by distinguishing, in the light of ongoing history, where the God-in-Christ-event had not been adequately understood or had been actually misunderstood in the light of cultural and religious presuppositions;
- 2) to develop the applications and expressions of meaning for the God-in-Christ-event;
- 3) to be open to the speaking of God to newly developing issues and circumstances not adequately anticipated or treated in the tradition.

With regard to these, the first century Christians and churches that produced the New Testament literature reflected a variety of views. While seeking to remain faithful to God's intention, they struggled with the diversity both within and between Christian communities.

The Johannine and Pauline traditions speak of developing procedures for discerning what was *true*:

- 1) *The role of the Spirit and the diversity it produces must be recognized.* One cannot make the error of Pharisaic Judaism in tying God's activity and revelation to the written word. Paul argues for the legitimacy of variety as long as the Gospel is not thereby deined (I Cor. 12, Gal. 1), while the Johannine community struggles with different theological perspectives without denying the role of the Spirit.
- 2) *One must stand within the available tradition of the Christ event, recognizing Jesus as Lord*

*and listening to what he taught.* There seems to be some recognition that the tradition on Jesus was varied so that some "critical" decisions were necessary to know what Jesus wished, taught and did (e.g. the handling of the tradition about Jesus in the Gospels). The Old Testament seems to have been largely seen as prophesying the action of God in Christ and the witness of the early church and not to have been used as witness independent of or parallel to the Christ event (for example I Peter 1:10ff, II Cor. 3:12ff. II Tim. 3:16-17 is an exception). In some cases Christ, or the Spirit of Christ, was seen as operative in the Old Testament history (similar to the way Jews viewed personified "Wisdom"). To stand within the Christ event was then also to stand within the streams of Old Testament history and their fulfillment.

3) *A quality of life (particularly "love") should be manifested* if one claimed one was expressing knowledge of God. (I Cor. 13, I John 4:7ff)

4) *Community discernment of perceptions of God's will and truth is important.* (I Cor. 14:26ff)

5) Especially in the authentic Pauline materials there is *a recognition of the limited nature of all human perception and the danger of the ego-centered use of knowledge* (note particularly I Cor. 8:1-3 and I Cor. 13).

It is true that from the later first century on the developing church in various ways becomes sociologically and theologically less tolerant, but this must be understood as related to its internal and external struggles. One must listen to its solutions without surrender of the freedom to be faithful to both tradition and Spirit.

If the Christian of today opts to stand within tradition and yet be responsible to God's contemporary action (the Spirit), one is in the uncertain situation of driving a road with many markers, but with the destination unclear. The analogy of a road takes seriously the long span of history through which the church has lived. The biblical analogy of the church as the Temple inhabited by the Spirit was appropriate when the church was seen not so much in terms of extended history. There is no other foundation than Christ, but one does not stand still on the foundation. Life flows out as a ribbon or highway through varied landscapes, and one must follow. One may protest that if the future is opened to the Spirit there are no absolutes, but that is not true. There is the absolute of God Godself, expressed in the Christ-event and active in on-going history. *In this way God remains God and all witness and interpretation remains just that.* The first two commandments have been taken seriously. The answers formulated by the church(es) over the centuries must be listened to seriously, but not taken ultimately. In the best sense, the traditions always lead us beyond themselves to the God who is beyond them.

## Creation and Science

In the history of Christianity the doctrine of creation has played a significant role. This has been used to explore creation's predicament, and its intention which is to be restored by God's saving action. Up to the development of modern science, creation has been interpreted primarily mythologically, expressing experienced phenomena and the projections of the human psyche. Views on creation were varied, witness the diverse Old Testament creation accounts -- especially the two in Genesis 1-3. There are also several New Testament creation accounts (e.g. John 1:1-18, Col. 1: 15-20, and Hebrews 1-2) which are reinterpretations of Old Testament and Intertestamental traditions. It is very important for Christians to reflect on what it means that the New Testament should bring Christ into its creation stories. This would indicate that the meaning of creation is not to be found in its state or condition, but in the "salvation/Christ event," for the Saviour is the Creator. Thus the true being of creation becomes eschatological as does salvation: only in the end will we see what it shall be in Christ, as indicated in a "re-creation" story in Romans 8:18ff. *It would seem that as God is continuously interpreted by the Spirit, so creation should be by the discoveries of science, God's continuing revelations about creation and the meaning of the Christ-event for creation.* Thus our myths and descriptions of creation should continuously be changing so as to

contribute to our understanding of God's intention for creation and creation's evolution and devolution. Our perception of what is so "by nature" then cannot be determined merely by the ancient myths which in themselves bear a witness no more uniform than other biblical traditions.

It is also intriguing to speculate about the relationship of history and development to creation. The natural world changes. History brings new conditions into being and the human environment developmentally "creates" persons and societies in certain directions. Though history and developmental processes produce what may be regarded as neutral, good or evil from value perspectives, at what point does "what has developed" become part of our understanding as to what exists "by nature" or by "the continuing activity of God." In application to the individual, to what extent is introjected culture and life experience part of the nature of the person and to what extent can that "nature" be modified or changed if that is deemed important. With this in mind, "creation" may not be the same for everyone.

There are several valuable contemporary reformulations of a Christian perspective on creation. One is the "creation spirituality" advocated by Matthew Fox which he finds expressed in the 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart.<sup>491</sup> Another is the work of the American monk Thomas Berry, reviewed in *Newsweek*. Berry argues that the sacred texts of world religions are the wrong place to discover what God thinks about nature. The universe itself is God's "primary revelation," telling the story of its evolution and providing the context of the understanding of the place of humanity in creation. In a volume published by the Sierra Club, *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry writes, "The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we all belong. We bear the universe in our being even as the universe bears us in its being."<sup>492</sup> Evolution is spiritual as well as material. "From its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness, the universe carries within itself a psychic as well as a physical dimension. Otherwise, human consciousness emerges out of nowhere and finds no real place in the cosmic story." Thus the cosmos is not fixed, but "self-transcending."

Berry believes that a global age of environmental consciousness is aborning, which requires a new myth of cosmic origins to give it cultural cohesion. His next goal is to elaborate "the new story of the universe," in such a way that it will provide an empirically based and religiously inspiring creation story which people of every and no religion can recognize and accept. In this story, the evolving cosmos is teacher: its destiny is our destiny, its values our values as the consciousness of the earth.<sup>493</sup>

There is no desire either to depreciate the insights of ancient myth or to lay claim to false objectivity on the part of modern science or ecological philosophy/theology. It is merely to affirm that our understanding of creation, from which we might formulate positions on issues, is constantly in process and that it is legitimate that this be so.

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491. Fox, Matthew, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980.

*Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Bear and Company, 1983.

*Western Spirituality, Historical Roots, Ecumenical Routes*, Bear and Company, 1981.

*The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Harper, 1988

492. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, 1988. Berry seems to have expanded upon the cosmic philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin.

493. Kenneth Woodward, "A New Story of Creation", *Newsweek*, NY: Newsweek Inc., June 5, 1989, pp. 70-72.

Viewed this way, the dialectic of Spirit and tradition, and that of modern science and the creation myths, provide two foci from which to approach the church's concerns in ways responsible to the past, yet open and committed to God's disclosures in history's continually unfolding process.

### Christian Faith and Other Religions

We are used to thinking of a historical continuity between Christianity and Judaism, though the meaning of this has been highly debated.<sup>494</sup> If there is this historical continuity from Judaism to Christianity, can there be other continuities than historical between Christianity and other ancient religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and can there be continuities between Christianity and Islam which started later? Is the only continuity one of historical connection, or can there be a continuity through the common spiritual reality which is coming to expression in various ways?

The recognition of such continuities ought not deny what Christians believe is the uniqueness of God's action in Christ, but Christ's uniqueness can be defined in such a way as not to be exclusive. Even Paul in Rom. 3:21-26, here in reference to Judaism, says that God sets forth publicly in Christ what God had been previously doing.

Because of the resurgence of other world religions and their entrance into the American scene, besides honest responsibility to truth, Christians need to find ways of relating to them and dialoguing, which means both sharing the Gospel and learning from them. This then becomes another source of "truth."

Hans Kung in his *Theology for the Third Millennium* well expresses this at the end of his chapter on "Is There One True Religion?":

*For me as a believer, for us as a community of faith, Christianity, so far as it attests to God in Christ, is certainly the true religion. But no religion has the whole truth, only God alone has the whole truth - Lessing was right about that. Only God himself - as we have always mentioned - is the truth.*

And for that reason one final point here: Christians cannot claim to comprehend him, the incomprehensible One, to have grasped him, the unsearchable One. Even in Christian faith, according to Paul, we recognize the truth itself, which is God, only as in a mirror, in puzzling outlines, fragmentarily, in certain aspects, always dependent upon our quite specific standpoint and place in time. Yes, Christianity too is "in via," on the way: *Ecclesia peregrinans, homines viatores*. And we are not on the way alone, but with millions upon millions of other human

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<sup>494</sup>. Does Judaism continue its own legitimate existence as a people covenanted with God or has it lost this relationship and now must come to God only through Christ? This can variously be argued from the New Testament. The perspective of the Johannine community, expressed in the Gospel, forged in extreme conflict with Judaism, affirms that there is no way but through Christ and that "Jews" who reject Christ are opposed to God. Paul's treatment of this issue in Rom. 9-11 is interesting, but indicates that Israel will be saved only as it responds to the Gospel, though they are the natural olive tree into which the Gentiles were grafted. Paul argues for the continuity of the church with Israel, but not the separate existence of Israel as a covenant people. This continuity was also recognized by the early church's inclusion of the Old Testament within the Christian canon, though the role of the Old Testament and its creator God was much debated in Christian Gnosticism. For me the solution to the proper Christian attitude towards Israel will come not from debating the New Testament texts which reflect the ancient struggle between Christians and Jews, as is also true of Jewish literature, but in exploring the full meaning of the Gospel and the theocentric focus of Jesus in Mark and Luke along with Paul's attempt to maintain his monotheism (yet the significance of Christ) in such places as I Cor. 1 and 15. There God is the *source* of all and the *end* to which all returns. (e.g. I Cor. 1:30 and I Cor. 15:28) Christ is the *means* in the Messianic Age which precedes the end.

beings from every possible religion and denomination, who are going their own way, but with whom the longer we travel together the more we will be in a process of communication ....

As far as the future goes, only one thing is certain: At the end both of human life and the course of the world Buddhism and Hinduism will no longer be there, nor will Islam nor Judaism. Indeed, in the end Christianity will not be there either. In the end no religion will be left standing, but the one Inexpressible, to whom all religions are oriented, whom Christians will only then completely recognize ... the truth face to face. And in the end there will no longer be standing between the religions a figure that separates them, no more prophet or enlightened one, not Muhammad and not the Buddha. Indeed even Christ Jesus, whom Christians believe in, will no longer stand here as a figure of separation. But he, to whom, Paul says, all powers (including death) are subjected, "subjects himself, then, to God" so that God himself (ho theos) - or however he may be called in the East - may truly be not just in all things but "everything to everyone"(I Cor. 15:28).<sup>495</sup>

The three dialectics mentioned above occur always within a *context* which shapes concerns and becomes the situation to which God would address a word. This has been significantly explored on a technical level in Robert Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies* and in a more popular vein in such books as Robert McAfee Brown's *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* and Letty Russell's *Changing Contexts of Our Faith*.<sup>496</sup> Though some of these dialectics will happen on the individual level, they should also happen in relationship to community. Sometimes individuals will have truth, functioning prophetically, but at other times shared insight and discernment brings one closer to Truth. Moreover, the community holds one to responsibility. Here both Christian and other communities are meant, such as those of science and other religions.

Besides the questions of continuity between Christian truth and other religions, there is the issue of a larger continuity: the *continuity in all Truth* within all of the dialectics which occur in the search for Truth. Continuity may be viewed in several ways. Some see continuity as a matter of discovering some truths and then adding others in a system which never denies what has been previously understood. Religion has often been guilty of this. However, in religion as well as science it seems clear that the discovery of new insight may disprove old assumptions about Truth. I would like to speak of *continuity in the mystery of Truth, in the mystery of Being and the Transcendent, in the mystery of God and cosmos*, as disclosed and discovered.

The Johannine Prologue, 1:1-18, and John 16:12-15 seem to support this even though the Johannine community might not have seen Truth as broadly as implied here.<sup>497</sup> In the Prologue the *Word*,

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<sup>495</sup>. Hans Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, transl. by Peter Heinegg, NY: Doubleday, 1988, pp. 254-256.

<sup>496</sup>. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis, 1985. Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, Westminster Press, 1985. Letty Russell, ed., *Changing Contexts of Our Faith*, Fortress Press, 1985.

<sup>497</sup>. While the body of the Gospel of John and I John are world-denying, the Johannine Prologue is world-affirming, much after the pattern of the Jewish treatment of Wisdom. The problem is: what did the final editor of the Gospel intend by the addition of the Prologue? Should the Gospel be understood in the light of the Prologue or should we understand that the editor, while using the Prologue for its themes of life, light, children of God, never intended us to take seriously the relationship of the Word and Creation which was in his source for the Prologue. I John 1:1-4, really commentary on the Gospel Prologue,

described in the language of Jewish Wisdom, the personified extension of God, was with God before creation, God's agent in creation, and the bringer of God's life and light throughout history, ultimately "tabernacling" in the person of Jesus. In John 16:12ff Jesus indicates that he could not speak all truth when with his disciples. The Spirit, regarded by the Johannine community as its "teacher," will guide into all truth, giving expression to what is Jesus' reality who gives expression to the Father's reality. In the language of the Johannine community this is discovered by "abiding" in the One who bears the reality.

The process described above might look something like a triangle, each corner being significant, with a two-fold inner operative reality and dynamic, perceived and disclosed within *contexts*:

### **JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN SALVATION TRADITION**

(Scripture, the Christ-event,  
Churchly, theological traditions)

#### *THE TRANSCENDENT DIMENSION - SPIRIT*

(especially the present action and person of God)

#### *CREATION/COSMOS*

### **CREATION TRADITIONS AND SCIENCE**

### **OTHER RELIGIONS**

What is expressed here is part of the emergence of a new paradigm for Christian theology. The emergence of a "postmodern paradigm" is extensively discussed in Hans Kung's *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, necessary reading for those who wish to pursue this issue further.<sup>498</sup> He discusses some of the same issues from his own perspective, helpfully providing a model in the mapping of paradigm changes in science, Christianity and other religions, together with a discussion of the nature and difficulties of paradigm change.

All of the factors of the above paradigm provide a dynamic field of interpretation within which the interpreter stands and which affects the process of interpretation.

### **Using Scripture to Teach Spirituality**

I have found my interests in spirituality making decided changes in both my methods for teaching the New Testament and my delineation of its message. In regards to method, I no longer teach historical criticism without in some way giving students some experience of the spiritual reading of Scripture. Its influence on my understanding of the message and meaning of the New Testament should be apparent in

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completely neglects the relationship of the Word (here the Gospel) to creation. I would like to understand the Prologue's emphasis on the Word's relation to creation, history and religious experience, completed in the Incarnation, to be supported by John 20's emphasis on the appearance of the still wounded Jesus, indicating that Jesus never surrendered his relationship with world and humanity.

<sup>498</sup>. Hans Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, transl. by Peter Heinegg, NY: Doubleday, 1988.

this book. I have also found that certain portions of Scripture lend themselves to the teaching of spirituality. Let me cite a few examples.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, knows that what is at stake is his understanding of the Gospel. Thus he makes this letter intensely personal, laying his own life and experience on the line. He begins with a reminder of the nature of his experience of Christ, his religious experience, and discusses the contexts of solitary experience and dialogue with early Christian communities in which it was refined and affirmed. He then deals with how this experience of Christ has caused him to reinterpret his Jewish tradition and how it has caused him to view his world (his discussion of elemental spirits). Finally, he treats his understanding of the Christian life as it was affected by both his experience of Christ and the Spirit. Through this letter one may explore Paul's religious experience, his reflection upon it, and its impact on his thought and development. The treatment of human development in Galatians 3-4 provides interesting elements for a contemporary psychological model.

In I Corinthians 12-15 Paul treats his understanding of spirituality. In I Cor. 12:1 he introduces this section by saying, "Now concerning spiritual persons, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed."<sup>499</sup> He then discusses how the confession of Jesus is the test of true spiritual experience and then launches into the familiar passage on spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 is a treatment of love and knowledge which sets these two into perspective in spirituality. Chapter 14 deals with the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy, and the spirituality of worship. Though chapter 15 is often seen as organizationally separate, it really belongs with 12-14.<sup>500</sup> In his treatment of the resurrection Paul indicates that though Christ is raised from the dead, they are not yet. Thus their spirituality must be expressed within the terms of their earthly life, with its limitations, for they have not yet received their spiritual bodies.

II Corinthians 3-5 presents humans as changed "from one degree of glory to another" by looking into the face of the Christ who himself reflects the glory of the God of creation. However, this treasure is "in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." Thus we must live with our humanity and it is only when we put on our "heavenly dwelling" that our human limitations will be transcended. But within our "earthen vessels" we *do* have this treasure. To this in II Cor. 11-12 Paul adds his rehearsal of sufferings and weakness, balanced by his abundance of revelations. To his revelations was added his thorn in the flesh, "a messenger of Satan," to remind him of his humanity and his need to depend on the power of Christ.

The Gospels also provide interesting possibilities. The structure of the Gospel tradition follows a basic outline of Christ's brief ministry, but the material also seems to be organized to parallel the experience of Christ with the experience of the believer. Certainly early Christians must have read the Gospels this way. The Gospel of Mark begins with the baptism of Jesus which contains many of the elements of the believer's baptism, then comes the testing (temptation) of the identity established in baptism. This is followed by the "day in the life of Jesus" in 1:14-39 which expresses many of the essential components of the Christian message and experience. Following that one encounters the controversies of chapters 2-3, similar to those experienced by early Christians. Then the problem of understanding the Gospel is dealt with in 4 in the context of an extended treatment of Jesus' parables. This is followed by the healings of chapter 5 and the description of the Christian mission in 6-8:21, of which the confession of Peter and the Transfiguration is the climax. And one could go on.

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<sup>499</sup>. The Greek sometimes translated "spiritual gifts" in this verse may also be translated "spiritual persons."

<sup>500</sup>. For example, there is no introductory formula introducing chapter 15 as a new subject. From chapter 7 on Paul introduces new subjects with "now" or "now concerning".

The Gospel of John provides rich resources. The Prologue alone speaks of the Word/Wisdom of God, with God before creation, agent of God in creation, and present throughout all history seeking to bring life and light and to enable persons to become God's children. This word becomes incarnate in Jesus. Creation, history, the Christ event are all components of an adequate understanding of spirituality. What is disclosed in the action of the Word is "grace and truth", God's "gracious love and faithfulness."

Following the Prologue John the Baptist proclaims Jesus as the one on whom the Spirit descends and who will baptize with the Spirit. He directs two of his disciples to Jesus by proclaiming, "Behold, the Lamb of God.!" They follow Jesus and Jesus asks what they seek, inviting them to "come and see", an invitation repeated by Philip to Nathanael. The encounter with Jesus is central. Each pericope in John deals with an encounter and ends with a confession. One may then see the stories following chapter one as dealing with what happens in encounter with Jesus to a variety of persons: Nathaniel, the young visionary; the wedding where Jesus was present incognito; the cleansing of the Temple; Nicodemus and his questions of the older years; the Samaritan woman; the official and his son; and the man who didn't want to be healed in chapter 5. Again one could go on.

It is important to note that there are varieties of spiritualities attested in Scripture, from the Matthaean approach, in which Jesus and his sayings are central as tradition and discipline, to the significant role for the Spirit and contemporary religious experience in Paul, Luke and John. Then one has the triumphalism of Luke in Acts where the resurrection and the Spirit seem to be the only paradigm of spirituality while in John and Paul the cross remains symbol of the limitations to spirituality within this life.

One valuable use of Scripture is to select several passages for meditation and exploration which will hopefully allow the texts to become the occasion for spiritual movement in one's life, windows of opportunity for the presence and guidance of God. Such usage receives is discussed in the chapter on Discernment. I frequently find it important to give expression to the studying of a passage and living with a text in a poem. For me this has been important to capture the spiritual movement of the text, lest I remain only with an analytical understanding. The following poem, Apocalypse, was written after being immersed in teaching the book of Revelation for several weeks.

### **Apocalypse 501**

[Though footnotes are provided, it is suggested that the poem ultimately be read without them so that its spirit is not constantly interrupted. To set the context for the poem and the Latin stanza with which it begins, it is suggested that the reader listen to the *Libera Me* from the *Messe de Requiem* of Faure, one of the most beautiful Requiems ever composed.]

Dona eiis requiem sempiternam. ....

Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna,  
In die illa tremenda:  
In die irae

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501. "Apocalypse" means "Revelation." The book of Revelation is called "The Apocalypse," and the poem is developed from the content of this book. But the term is also given to a type of Jewish and early Christian literature prevalent from the 2nd century BC to the first century AD. It was a literature born in suffering and hope and through it the raw edges of the human soul are often disclosed. The historical setting of the final form of the book of Revelation (it originated in stages) was the suffering of Christian Churches at the hand of the Roman government at the end of the first century AD, and the author of the book regards Rome as a great Harlot whom God will destroy.

Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra:  
Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem. 502

Refrain: Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna.

John, exile on Patmos,  
In The Spirit,  
Visioned a new world:  
    City from heaven,  
    Like a jewel,  
No tears,  
No Death,  
No mourning or pain. 503

Refrain

But Oh, the pain in his heart  
For churches he would never see  
    And suffering he could not change.  
It was the Tribulation and the End.  
"Be faithful," said the voice,  
"And I will give you the crown of life." 504

Refrain

He saw HIM!  
HE stood tall,  
    Hair as white wool,  
    In the midst of his churches,

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502. This first stanza is taken from words that are parts of a Requiem Mass said for the dead. A usual part of such a Mass is the envisioning of the Day of Wrath, the prayer for eternal rest, and the prayer for freedom from eternal death. Notice that while the stanza begins by speaking of "them" it soon becomes "my" prayer, for prayer and the poem soon becomes ours as our pain joins its. The "Libera me" line then becomes the Refrain to be repeated responsorially after each stanza. Translated the Refrain is:

Give them eternal rest. ....

Free me, O Lord, from eternal death,  
On the day of wrath,  
Upon that horrible day:  
When heavens and earth are to be moved  
When you shall come to judge the world by fire..

503. Rev. 1:9, 21:1-4. Revelation was likely written in three stages. Its origin was in the tradition of the teaching of John the Baptist (chpts. 4-11), modified and added to during the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66-73 AD (chpts. 4-22), and then this material was again modified by the Christian John who is in exile for his faith on the Isle of Patmos. John's particular contribution is the vision of chapter 1 and the letters to the seven churches in 2-3, with modifications to the rest of the book. It thus captures within its materials all of the Jewish and Christian suffering and hope of the first century. Though John was not author of all of the materials, its visions gave expression to the pain and vengeance within his soul.

504. Rev. 2-3, 2:10. In Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic the period of the Great Tribulation was seen as a time of terrible suffering preceding the end.

Eyes as a flame of fire,  
The MAN who had the keys of death and Hades. 505

Refrain

And then there swam before his eyes  
A Lamb once slain,  
Whose blood ransomed humans for God;  
A Woman clothed with the sun;  
A Dragon waiting to devour  
A Child waiting to be born;  
And a Harlot waiting to be destroyed,  
Drunk with blood,  
On a scarlet Beast. 506

Refrain

And heaven poured fire upon the Harlot City,  
Till she writhed in pain.  
And millstones stopped,  
Lamps went out,  
The bridegroom in silent anguish  
Clutched his lifeless bride.  
And She was no more. 507

Refrain

And John remembered a LAMB ONCE SLAIN,  
And saints whose blood stained the earth,  
And HIS winepress that poured blood of vengeance  
High as a horses bridle.  
And he saw the birds swirl the crimson skies  
Over a crimson earth  
For the supper of the slain. 508

Refrain

And the pain of the world rose,  
Beginning like a wisp of wind,

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505. This stanza is taken from the vision of the "Son of Man" in Rev. 1. The term "MAN" or its equivalent "Son of Man" was used in Apocalyptic literature of the original heavenly MAN after the pattern of which earthly man was made. This MAN was thought to be reflected in Gen. 1, and the earthly man/Adam was described in Gen. 2-3. The heavenly Man was expected to aid in the final struggle with Satan and the ascended Jesus was identified with this person.

506. The Dragon represented Satan; the Child, the Messiah; the Harlot, Rome. Rev. 12-17. The Lamb once slain (Rev. 5) may have been derived from Is. 53:7. In John 1:20 John the Baptist describes Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

507. Rev. 18.

508. Rev. 5, 14:17-20, 19:17-21.

Gathering the world's debris,  
Till it screamed in clouds  
That twisted and turned  
Until all seemed pulled within its vortex.

Refrain

And the cry of every mother  
And of every lover  
And of all dashed hopes  
Blackened the skies.  
And John pressed his hands to his eyes  
To shut out what he saw with his soul.

Refrain

And John screamed: "NO MORE!"

And suddenly  
There was silence.  
And the MAN with white hair and eyes of fire  
Became a LAMB STILL SLAIN  
With no fire and bloody winepress.

Refrain

In pain the LAMB cried from a cross:  
"Why have you forsaken me?" 509  
And its sound was taken by the hills and the mountains  
Till the earth reverberated,  
And his cry pierced heaven.

Refrain

And there was another VISION.  
[THERE MUST ALWAYS BE A VISION!]  
A river of LIFE,  
Bright as crystal, flowed from the THRONE OF GOD,  
From which trees with leaves for healing  
Drew their strength.  
AND THERE WAS NO MORE ANYTHING ACCURSED.<sup>510</sup>

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509. Mark 15:34.

510. This last stanza is taken from Rev. 22:1-5 which is really the conclusion of the last of the visions (21:22-22:5), after which a number of paragraphs are added for various purposes. In a world where so much has been destroyed, this last vision preserves the "nations" and speaks of their illumination and healing rather than their destruction. The poem interprets this as John's repentance of his anger and the devastation he envisions for his world. There has been enough of suffering and too little of the God of the LAMB STILL SLAIN. The emphasis in Revelation on the LAMB ONCE SLAIN, leaves his suffering behind so

Refrain

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that he became the vengeful RAM of Apocalyptic thought. To be the LAMB STILL SLAIN means he still takes the suffering of the world to himself and gives it expression, and the last three stanzas of the poem reflect this.