

Rethinking Some Things

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Within my life-time I have found myself frequently rethinking some things. It is good intentionally to examine one's understandings and presuppositions, but often rethinking is forced upon one by new insights or life experiences. The several pieces included here disclose some of my rethinking. Of course they are not the result of sudden changes in perspective, but rather a gradual growth in awareness with a consequent movement in the direction of new convictions. They do, at least for me, represent crucial theological issues.

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Variety in Hermeneutics: The Integrity of the Text and the Integrity of the Interpreter

I used to think that there was a right way to understand and a right methodology which would lead to understanding. My contacts with many scholars with differing perspectives, from different cultures, and with students with different ways of handling Scripture have made me realize that this is just not so. When Christianity in the last several centuries was taken to various areas of the world and its message proclaimed, it was usually communicated in such a way as to support Western or European approaches and colonial interests: the established socio-political systems and the established religious perspectives. We have to recognize that this was done by persons who had difficulty separating themselves from their cultural perspectives which was usually all that they knew and understood. But it was a type of imperialism which did not consider the values and insights of the cultures and persons to which they came.

I would like to suggest that there are also ways in which the educative process assumes the ignorance of the student and the rightness of the perspectives and knowledge of the educator. It is true that one comes

to an educational institution to learn what one does not know. But each person brings with them gifts, experience and insights which should somehow be dignified in the educative process. This is true of any person, whatever age, but it is especially an issue when someone comes to Seminary in mid-life after exercising leadership and developing professional skills in other areas of life.

Hermeneutics is the name given to what one might call the science of interpretation. Usually one seeks to develop a hermeneutic which is appropriate to the materials or text that one would interpret. Since the Enlightenment, and influenced by cultural tendencies before it, we have developed a scientific approach to Scripture which Europeans and North Americans, up to a short while ago, felt would offer precise and correct descriptions of the meaning of the text. We call it the historical critical approach. It has much to commend it, especially since our culture has approached things largely in this "scientific" manner. It does call us to objectivity and to the attempt to let the text bring us its own message rather than our reading into the text. However, more recently we have come to realize how much this approach has been a child of our own culture and how by its analysis it is in danger of distancing us from the text rather than opening to us the text.

We also did not realize that there is no such thing as objectivity. Each historian has an understanding of history and methodology by which to approach the text which is brought to it and which affects its interpretation. Each person has a perspective shaped by one's identity and concerns which is brought to the text. Thus Afro-Americans, Central Americans, women, men, liberation theologians, those working with base communities in South America, Asians and others: all have perspectives and culturally determined methodologies to bring to the text. In recent years I have been in groups with and listened to Latin Americans, Afro-Americans, Feminists, and others who have greatly broadened the perspectives by which I approach Scripture.¹ A special interest of mine has become the devotional interpretation of Scripture, one of the primary usages of Scripture since the days of early Christianity. With all of this in mind it became clear to me that to arrive at common methods and common answers in our interpretation of Scripture is almost impossible. Even the historical critics have not succeeded in doing this -- look at the varied conclusions in the commentaries and the constant development in methodologies by which the text is approached..

Then there is the role of faith and the Spirit in interpretation. The form of our faith causes us to bring the lens of our faith to Scripture. Because of the great variety of perspectives within Scripture, we gravitate to those portions which seem to support the form of our faith and we read other portions in the light of this. It should be remembered that this is a theological critical principle, something used for the interpretation of Scripture long before historical critical procedures developed. Usually the faith which we bring to Scripture has been somehow validated in our own experience and so is very important to us.

While different persons will bring different forms of faith to Scripture, the role of the Spirit, as presented in the New Testament, is to work in personal ways gifting individuals with differing gifts *for the good of the whole Christian community*. Thus variety in the forms of faith is partially the expression of the individual and partially the activity of the Spirit. The problem in variety is when it does not contribute to the good of the community. Paul in I Cor. 12, when speaking of the varied gifts, needs to keep reminding the Corinthians that these gifts have their source in one God and serve one Lord.

It would seem to me that what the seminary needs to do in the interpretation of Scripture is to call for responsibility to and the integrity of:

⇒ **the text,**

¹ . Three very helpful books on interpretive perspectives are: Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991; R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, London: SPCK, 1991; and Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Phila.: Westminster, 1985. I believe that it is the responsibility of each interpreter of Scripture to seriously explore another perspective besides one's own so that one learns how to see the text through the eyes of others. This should not mean any devaluing of one's own perspective unless one comes to discover it as inadequate.

- ⇒ **the author and community of the text,**
- ⇒ **the intended meaning of the text (to the extent that is discernable),**
- ⇒ **and the God of the text (who worked with the author and now works in the interpreter unfolding what the text once meant and what it now comes to mean in new contexts)**

The seminary then needs to provide the information and methods by which the integrity of the text can be preserved and the text might be understood within its own historical and cultural context.

It also needs to provide the best information and insights which interpreters have gained about the meaning of the text. The student needs to learn these methods and insights.

But each student will come to the text with a personal perspective born of life experience and religious experience, and the interpretation of different persons will not be the same. *Thus the values of methods and information needs to be affirmed without allowing the perspective of the teacher and the findings of a discipline to disrespect the integrity and insights of the student.* The integrity of the student needs to be preserved, as does the integrity of the professor, whose conclusions and insights may not always be appreciated by the students. *And the gifts of both the professor and the students need to be preserved and heard, but without neglecting the reason for the course, which is to provide an educative experience and new information which was likely not brought to the class by the student.*

In order for this to be accomplished, the class needs to become *a community for learning*, gathering around the text; to become a place where all are responsible to the learning process and each can bring gifts and learning needs, within the limits provided by the need to deal with the content and intent of the course. It means that *the student must enter into the learning process in a motivated and committed way, assuming responsibility for his or her learnings.* In this way a professor may involve students who are ready and prepared to participate in the educative process and does not have to use class time to feed the student with information for which there is little taste or which is so new that the student does not have resources from which to contribute to the learning process.

If the recognition of differences of perspective and insight is appropriate, then *differences and even conflict* (which may be described as the tension produced by differences) *must be recognized as legitimate.* We should not be afraid of conflict. However, *it needs to be the prerogative of the professor to manage and moderate the conflict and expression of individuality as the one who is ultimately responsible for the process of the class.*

If the above is taken seriously, there will be variety among the students in the results of any course. *Not every conclusion or position on a subject matter, from the perspective of the church and its concerns for leadership and faithfulness to its tradition, is of the same value and some positions may be seen as disruptive to the church.* One concern that the church would have would be the aggressiveness and exclusiveness with which a pastor might pursue his/her convictions, without recognizing the rights and legitimacy of those who believe or understand differently. *Thus the church always needs to decide on what one might call the boundaries of diversity. I do not believe that it is the business of the Seminary to determine these boundaries, though this may be suggested as each person, professor and student, confesses their faith and understanding.* And the seminary does need to make the student aware of the church's boundaries and of the lived consequences of particular theologies. The difficulty is that when one too quickly points out the "limitations" of a student's theology, this usually drives the person into a position of self-defense from which she or he cannot grow by the learning process that is natural to him or her.

Whatever the conclusions of the student, the student also needs to be responsible for the intentions and materials of the course, and to help to provide for others a context in which education can take place.

Doing Theology

One of the tasks of theological education is to provide students with the knowledge related to various fields and the professional skills which will enable them to function as religious professionals and enablers of the rest of the religious community. The "theological" of theological education may be understood narrowly as one of the central disciplines, called "theology" or "systematic theology". However, systematic theology, as valuable as it is (for how can we neglect the minds hunger for understanding and coherence), is an activity on a secondary level, seeking to make sense of and refine the initial, imprecise language used in our religious traditions, borrowed from the culture to reflect experience of the Transcendent. Theology in a broader sense is best viewed as related to what is done in the whole of theological education to stay close to and live with the religious experience embodied in our language with all of its refinements and applications. I would think of this as "doing theology," which describes this better than just "theology."

Literally "theology" means a "logos" of God, something that speaks God and communicates God. For the Christian this "logos" has its origin in the Gospel, the "good news" of Jesus Christ, although behind this "good news" there are the powerful streams of Old Testament tradition. This good news is understood not as merely a complex of descriptive words, but as embodying a reality: it *is* "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith", (Rom. 1:16). Its primary value lies not in the details of what it says, but in what it mediates. When it is given the freedom to be, it is hope-full, life-ful, joy-ful, and God-full. If we forget that theology *speaks God* and conclude that it is only descriptive, i.e. that it speaks to us only *about* God, we have lost the heart and mystery of theology. It then lies dead before us as something to be analyzed and dissected, something to be understood rather than experienced. It no longer exercises its power over us. The construction of theological systems has often been done upon the remains of theology with little thought as to how it functions as a living organism.

In the light of the diverse Synoptic descriptions of the historical Jesus, the Johannine affirmation of the "Word" as incarnate (John 1:14) that drew upon the language of Jewish Wisdom, and of Paul's attempts to express theology in two different cultures (I Cor. 9:19ff), we become aware that theological expression is always bound up with history and culture. Thus our attempts to describe, though hopefully faithful to God, will also in some ways conceal God because they are situationally and culturally bound. Actually, there is no other way this can be for we exist within history and culture. But it also is not tragic, for God prefers to be "relevant" in this fashion.

It is important not to let God as Godself be "bound" by our language, be limited to our words and descriptions, nor to make idols out of our language (against the first two commandments). We need to know that we now know only in part and that it is only in the end time that we will know God as God now knows us (I Cor. 13:12). We must also avoid an approach to knowledge which allows it to inflate our egos, to "puff us up," rather than opting for love which builds up (I Cor. 8:1). Even when we have developed our theologies, it is important to remind ourselves of what Paul says at the end of his grand schema of salvation history in Rom. 9-11:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

Theology is only rightfully done, according to much of the New Testament, when the traditions, the words, thoughts and creeds of former generations, are subjected to the re-interpretation and re-forming activity of God's Spirit in the living context of the present. God never abdicated God's sovereignty to words once spoken and thoughts once expressed. God still speaks in a living voice to those who will hear and God still communicates Godself. Theology then is never finished as long as time exists and history, culture and personal experience change. Moreover, it is the re-forming of tradition and listening to the God of the present which integrates theology into the fibre of our existence.

Ultimately, theology is devotional.² Its words reflect and introduce us to the God and life realities which they re-present. They are God-mediating and life-producing. They are a sanctuary in which we may meet God and respond in faith, hope and love, and from which we may move into life. If they do not do this they are only a historical and philosophical exercise. Theology then goes hand in hand with mysticism and ethics. The devotional nature of theology calls for the maintaining of a "free and holy space" where God may act and we may respond, surrounded by our theological traditions but not bound by them. The integrity of this free space must be preserved, for it is at the heart of religious life.

Lastly, theology is not the task of a professional elite, but that of every Christian, and every Pastor, who must struggle with understanding life and God and make sense of their own existence. It is the task of every person who would meet God in the words of our tradition and allow their lives to be transformed. To be too concerned about theology being "right" makes it the preserve of the expert and deprives the laity of its life-giving qualities. *It is not as important that it be right as that it be done, for its purpose is fulfilled not as much in its rightness as in its drawing us closer to the God from whom life comes.* There are always consequences of theological views, and sometimes bad consequences of some bad theology, but these are risks worth taking. If theology is also understood as always in process, misunderstandings may be fruitfully worked out as one lives with one's theology and everyone does not have to understand everything at once. Nicholas Count von Zinzendorf said that the problem with the theologians of his time was that they wanted to understand everything at once. He believed that God will disclose to us what we need to understand when we need to understand it, and God only asks of us what God has given us. Perhaps one way to safely take the risks of doing theology is to do so within the context of the community of faith and its wisdom. This should not deny the possibilities of individual perceptions which may differ from the community's wisdom nor should the individual deny the significance of the accumulated wisdom which is at variance with individual insight.

Theology done by experts, as much as it is needed, when handed to us as finished, merely to be understood, may neither belong to us nor affect our lives. As religious professionals, it is our responsibility to help laity to understand that in their reflection on life and God they are certainly doing theology and that God encourages this. Certainly a God compared to the Father of the two uncomprehending sons in the Parable of the Prodigal (Luke 15) can tolerate a little errant theology in our journey home to God. And the purpose of theology, like the purpose of the parable, *is* to bring us home to God.

Reality and Description

Description may be related to *inner* or *outer* events concerning which one seeks to communicate to another.

² . I would strongly recommend the reading of an interview presented as a "Conversation with David Tracy," Professor at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, published in *Cross Currents*, Fall 1994, Vol. 44, No. 3, the interview conducted by Todd Breyfogle and Thomas Levergood. A title given this interview on the cover is "Why Theologians Should Pray." In the interview Tracy comments on the interpretation of Scripture (pp. 299-300):

One of the most difficult issues at present for theology is to allow the genuine achievements of the historical-critical method in Scripture studies to be a part of theological education, as in most cases it has become. But not to allow that to, in effect, take over - as it often has - and thereby eliminate the understanding of these texts as Scripture, as the church's book, which demands a mode of hermeneutics that is properly religious and theological. It is one of the gravest issues at the moment because, more and more, Scripture scholars seem no longer capable of understanding the distinction and the need. It is very odd when you realize that these texts, among other things, are clearly religious and theological texts, not just classics of the canon, not just sacred texts for the tradition, but in fact Scripture, with a quite specific meaning. There is a way in which Scripture scholarship, despite its extraordinary achievements through the historical-critical method, has become a kind of scholasticism, separating itself from the proper functions that the Bible should have for the Christian community and thereby for theology. Theology should be related to the religious, theological, prayerful reading of the Scriptures of the church - and it should also be related to historical-critical scholarship and literary-critical scholarship and any other form of modern scholarship that's available. But usually it turns out to be something like an either/or choice, which I think is disastrous.

An *inner event* occurs in the inner space or “mind” of the person and is the result of the thought process and inner world of the person. This often results in expressions in language and gesture for the sake of communication. An *outer event* is something which occurs in outer space, time and history. If it or its effects are observed, one may seek to communicate about it to another. When one seeks to communicate something about an outer event, the very engagement in the process of communication makes this involve inner events as well.

Description of an event involves the *event itself* which is usually complex rather than simple. It also includes the *causes* of the event (such as biological, chemical, physical, historical, economic, causes). Involved may be the *intent* of someone for the event, which implies that *purpose and meaning* may be involved. Description also involves *the way the event is perceived and described by the observer or “describer”*, which is affected by the world view, available language, personal experience, preconceptions of the “describer,” and even the physical condition and acuity of senses of the “describer.” In the process of describing there may be *meanings perceived* in the event which are dependent not just on anyone’s intent for the event, but upon the way in which the event develops and progresses and what it comes to mean to the “describer”. Description may often involve a “dialogue” of the “describer” with the event, a process, in which adequate understanding and description is sought, in which later dawning of meaning is added to initial understanding. One always has to note that this dialogical process may be very much related to the inner process and reflection of the “describer,” but this is still what the event has come to mean. What the event comes to mean is part of its truth and reality.

It is important to recognize the *complexity* implied by the above, for *the way event transcends description is not only inherent in the difficulties of describing and the limitations of language, but also in the complexity of event and its description.*

As to the limitations of language, *words ordinarily used to describe are often borrowed for the occasion from those available in a language or culture*, with a desire for the hearer to be able to appreciate, experience, encounter what has been described. Seldom does one create precise, new words to describe something because their precision and meaning would only be in the mind of the “describer” and no one to whom the description is made would know their meaning. The hearer of the description only has in mind what is available in the culture and introjected. The concern in using this borrowed language is not analysis or refinement of expression, but to bring the experience to the hearer or the hearer to the experience, to *reflect it*. At this stage there is not much concern about the precision of the language in its description of the experience or how it fits the accumulation or sum of understanding and description.

When more concern about the precision of the description develops and the relationship of this description to other experiences and the accumulation of understanding, then *a secondary process begins in which one reflects on the language used*, its appropriateness, considers changes in language, and relates the language used to the thought and language systems current. As one develops more concern for the precision of language, one may *move from the world of the original experience and attempts to reflect it in language to the world of language with a consequent distancing from the original experience*. As precision is developed in description, those who engage in this develop new or refined meanings for the words they use which may now be understood only by the “professional” and are no longer understood by the average person in the culture. It is also possible that one may become only concerned with the language itself and forget the experience it reflects.

With the gaining of *historical distance* from the original experience, persons or communities may become invested in certain language and description so that *a certain form of words becomes standard and true*, its accuracy not to be contested. The concern then may be to secure adherence to the words rather than to encounter what is described.

It would seem to make sense that in whatever way language is used to describe, we need to preserve a sense of (and preserve the integrity of) that which the language describes.

As implied by the description of the complexity of event and the use of language above, the experience and the reality described transcends the language. This is particularly true of religious experience as expressed by the mystics. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says:

... and because of it (the cloud of unknowing) you can neither see Him clearly with your reason in the light of understanding, nor can you feel Him with your affection in the sweetness of love. Be prepared, therefore, to remain in this darkness as long as must be, crying evermore for Him whom you love. For if you are ever to feel Him or to see Him, it will necessarily be within this cloud and within this darkness.³

In one of his famous poems, John of the Cross says:

I entered - where - I did not know,
Yet when I found that I was there,
Though where I was I did not know,
Profound and subtle things I learned;
Nor can I say what I discerned,
For I remained uncomprehending,
All knowledge transcending.

And if you wish to hear,
This highest knowledge is conceived
In a sense, sublime and clear
Of the essence of the Deity;
It is an act of His great Clemency
That keeps us there uncomprehending,
All knowledge transcending.⁴

In a similar vein Paul says:

Love never ends;
as for prophecies,
 they will pass away;
as for tongues,
 they will cease;
as for knowledge,
 it will pass away.

For our knowledge is imperfect
and our prophecy is imperfect;
but when the perfect comes,
 the imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child,
 I spoke like a child,
 I thought like a child,
 I reasoned like a child;
when I became a man,
 I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly,
 but then face to face.
Now I know in part;
 then I shall understand fully,
 even as I have been fully understood.

³. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Introductory Commentary and Translation by Ira Progoff, New York: Julian Press, 1957, III,5.

⁴. Gerald Brenan, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1973.

So faith, hope, love abide,
 these three;
 but the greatest of these is love.⁵

If the above is true, then those who use theological language should consider that:

1. *Naming and unnamings, saying and unsaying, at the same time* maintain seriousness of description and take seriously what transcends description. Unnaming and unsaying are simply realizing that what one names transcends what one names. Something is described as both being and not being its description.

2. *Variety of naming also helps.* The more there is variety of naming, the easier it is to maintain transcendence. The existence of four Gospels helps us to realize that the truth of Jesus is not to be limited to the terminology of one of them. *Singular descriptions which are regarded as precise and exact cause loss of transcendence.* Description, without closure, from a variety of perspectives is best.

It is important to remember this in theologizing and the development of theological systems or creedal statements. Variety should be encouraged and the limitation of any singular description recognized. This may be done either by encouraging variety of theological expression or permission to understand common creeds or theologies in various ways. One form of creed which encourages varied interpretation is narrative, such as in the Apostles Creed. Here the second article is a narration of the events of Christ's life with a minimum of explanation. A good example of variety of theological expression in the New Testament is the great variety of Christological language to be found even within a single writer.

Whenever one moves from the variety of language which seeks to reflect reality to the human attempt to reflect on the language, give it precision and work it into a system, one is in danger of losing what is described.

3. *The dialectic of transcendence and immanence.* The immanent expressions or realizations of the transcendent and the transcendent cannot be spoken of separately. What is spoken of is transcendence in immanence and immanence expressing transcendence. For example, in the Eucharist Christ is present in the bread and wine, but also transcends the bread and wine. God is present in the incarnation but transcends the incarnation. God seems to point this out by giving the Spirit after the Incarnation. The Spirit keeps us from thinking that all that God is is in the Incarnation. Really, anything symbolized or described is both present in the symbol or description and transcends it.

One way to approach this is to seek to allow the the issues and reality of the originative experience behind the description to be present in the description. This is what Paul meant when he said that the Gospel was the "power of God" in Romans 1:16. The Gospel is not mere words. Rather God uses it as a place where God is present and acts. The Gospel also tells the story of Christ and God's action in him. Thus the telling of the story brings to life again the crucial events of Christ's life and the action of God and so carries with it the reality it describes.

4. *Temporal and spacial distinctions disappear.* Although we speak of locations of events and experiences in time and space, the meaning of the events and experiences transcends such locations and there are times when we deal with a transcendent reality which itself is not bound to time and space.

5. *Loss of subject, object, reflexive distinctions.* This means that in the description of some experiences it is very hard to decide who is the subject and who is the object. In religious experience we act towards God while God acts towards us while we act upon ourselves. The event is a whole and something is lost when it is analyzed and priorities are established.

Christian tradition often objects to mystical union or loss of distinction between the human and God as subject and object, seeing this as the person becoming God. This misunderstands that this is just a way of

⁵ . I Cor. 13:8-13.

speaking of the subject-object distinction disappearing and that the center of this experience is grace, not divinization.

6. *Surrender of Will, Ego, Self, Objective Awareness, and Acceptance of Bewilderment*, are all ways of allowing the reality to be without seeking to control and structure. Christian tradition has also been afraid that loss of ego and will would lead to Quietism (allowing God to act upon us without responsibility for our own life and action), but surrender of the will or ego is so that action which comes from religious experience may become God's, not just ours. Though discipline may be important in leading to the moment of surrender, the experience *in* surrender is all of grace (of God), so discipline leads one to the moment of grace which goes beyond discipline.

Acceptance of Bewilderment is an acceptance of moving beyond the order, systems, understandings, and world which now provides structure to our existence and to surrender in trust. It also involves trust in the mystery of existence which may contain dangers and where one cannot predetermine what is real or unreal, good or evil. Gerald May, in *Will and Spirit*, speaks of the "contemplative leap of faith."

I DO NOT KNOW. I do not know what is ultimately good or evil, nor even what is real or unreal. But I do know that there is no way I can proceed upon my own personal resources. In this as in all things, I am utterly and irrevocably dependent upon a Power that I can in no way objectify. I call this Power God, and God is beyond my understanding, beyond good and evil, beyond doubt and trust, beyond even life and death. God's love and power and Spirit exist in me, through me, and in all creatures. But God is unimaginably BEYOND all this as well. I also know that in my heart I wish to do and be what God would desire of me. Therefore, in humility and fear, I give myself. I commit my soul to God, the One Almighty Creator, the Ultimate Source of reality. Good or bad, right or wrong, these things are beyond me. I love, but I do not know. I live and act and decide between this and that as best I can, but ultimately, I do not know. And thus I say, in the burning vibrancy of Your Love and Terror, THY WILL BE DONE.⁶

7. *Nothing is Something*. The word "nothing" may be used to say that no thing is present. However, in mysticism the word "Nothing" has often been used to refer to that which we cannot describe. Thus *Nothing is something which transcends description*. It is interesting to think of *creatio ex nihilo* in this way. Creation is not from no thing but it is from that which cannot be described.⁷

Implications of a Relational Spirituality

When religion is seen as doctrine or institution it can be described, understood and accepted as something whose terms are clear. When religion is described as a certain conversion experience, it can be described and judged as to whether it fits the norm. When religion is believing the Bible, for many the words of truth are understood as equivalent to the words on the page. In all of these approaches all is concrete and describable.

When religion and spirituality are understood to be relational or interpersonal, one presupposes that one is dealing with God as person and we as persons, and spirituality consists of an interpersonal relationship. Though there are constants to such an interpersonal relationship (the same persons are engaged and one discovers personality constants in the persons), yet the changes occurring in each of the persons, the accumulation of new experience, and the changes wrought by time and context which give birth to different needs – all mean that two persons interacting in one situation is not completely like the two interacting in another. Where in religion viewed as theology or ethics one might supposedly construct truths relevant for all time, when the heart of religion is interpersonal relationship it is difficult to construct such eternal truths. God is eternally true, but truths may not be.

⁶. Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982., p 227.

⁷. In the development of my thought I found very helpful Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1994

The Ancient Moravian Church said that the **Essential** was the relationship with the Triune God and the human response in faith, love and hope. All else is **Ministerial** and the variety in the way things are done is **Incidental**. For Count Zinzendorf and the Renewed Moravian Church the essence of religion is the **heart** (an inner organ of perception) **relationship** with the Savior through whom there is open to the believer a relationship with all that the Triune God is and wishes for us. Relational religion is the essence of **simplicity** and all, infant, senile and learned, may have this religion. Relational religion is the heart of the Moravian understanding of religion.

This relationship is a reality, as the Savior and God are realities. Luke Timothy Johnson in *The Real Jesus* comments on the difference that a real resurrected Jesus makes in our approach to the knowledge of Jesus:

Belief in the resurrection had important implications for our knowledge of Jesus. We deal not with a dead person of the past but with a person whose life continues, however mysteriously, in the present. This changes everything. If Jesus is alive among us, what we learn about Jesus must include what we can continue to learn from him. It is better to speak of "learning Jesus," rather than of "knowing Jesus," because we are concerned with a process rather than a product. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, HarperSanFrancisco (quoted in Christian Century, Dec. 2, 1998)

Elements of a Relational Spirituality

1. Relationship starts in the *gift of relationship*. Without this gift, from each involved in the relationship, relationship would not be possible. Thus relationship starts in *grace*. Thus is also understood as *love*. Love here is not a sentimental feeling or a deserved response, but the unselfish and free choice of one to give oneself to another and to care for another.
2. Faith is the human response to God: in interpersonal terms it is understood as *trust, faithfulness, fidelity*. It is *not just believing something, but believing Someone and being faithful to Someone*. One does not just trust that statements and beliefs are true, but that the person of God with whom one deals is faithful and trustworthy and that what is needed will be given appropriately in the changing circumstances of life. Faith thus has a *process and history* in which interactions with God occur and which can be described as *following* our Lord.
3. What God gives is the relationship with *the God in whom all possibilities and solutions to life's needs exist*. When God has one, or one has God, one has everything that is possible, everything that might be called for by circumstances, and the One in whom all possibilities exist.
4. In the field of knowledge the gaining of *control* may be helpful, but not in interpersonal relationship. The best happens when the other is given the freedom to be oneself and to do what is needed. *God needs the freedom to be God, which implies our relinquishing the attempt to control everything – including God*.
5. One needs to enter a *process of thinking about God*, meditating on God, getting familiar with God, entering into spiritual (interpersonal) relationship in depth: all of which are really a part of interpersonal relationship.
6. One needs to *pay attention to God*, to listen to God and give God a chance to relate and communicate. Theology, Bible and Church are then not just to be understood and accepted, but are opportunities to hear from God. When one reads Scripture one needs not only to pay attention to the words, but to what God may say using the words and beyond the words.
7. *One needs both to think about and stop thinking about God in historical terms*. This means, for example, that Jesus was a first century Jew, dressed like a first century Jew, thinking like a first century Jew, addressing the problems of his day, and speaking the Aramaic language. But he is also a contemporary addressing our needs. Knowing the historical Jesus helps us to get acquainted with Jesus so that we might better know what he is like in our time. We need to read the historical Gospels until the Jesus beyond the Gospels more fully emerges from the Gospels. The Gospels help us to do

that since they are not all alike and do not agree in all aspects. Thus we are prevented from making any one Gospel the final description of Jesus.

8. Knowing and believing involves the *suffering of uncertainty and the need to trust* beyond what we know (but not beyond Whom we know) and the *suffering (and joy) involved in living with someone and being changed by someone*. Knowledge of truth may sometimes involve change and transformation, but knowledge of a person always does.
9. One does not have to know and understand everything if one is in relationship with the One who knows all. One may be patient with oneself and with life, and know and appreciate what is given one to know. One is not saved by knowledge, but by relationship.
10. *The religion of relationship is available to all from the infant to the senile because it does not depend upon understanding*. It depends upon God giving the gift of relationship.
11. Relationship is the *primary power and resource* from which human life is to be lived.

The Image in the Mirror

The thoughts of this article have been developing for some time. Hopefully my thoughts are now sufficiently clear that I may share them.

I come from a tradition (the Moravian Church) which since the 18th century has emphasized a simplicity of faith: finding all in the person of Jesus who relates to the individual and the community through the heart, not the intellect. This also has to do with a simplicity of grace: all is God's gift. Such simplicity means that all may have religion, even the infant and those with sensory or intellectual handicaps. Religion depends upon the relationship with the Savior, perceived by the heart, which is gift - as all relationship really is. The Incarnation of the Savior provides this with concrete expression. Such simplicity is important for many and is what enables them to have religion,

A different type of simplicity is the approach which sees Christianity's essentials as certain beliefs and often a certain type of conversion experience. A more complicated simplicity is to identify Christian truth with institutional forms or a doctrinal system. The Moravian concern for simplicity has to do with finding the *center* of religion that all might have faith. This other type of simplicity often has to do with "binding" the forms of religion to one way and one expression so that what one must do to have religion is clear and fixed. "Binding" will be discussed at the end of this article.

And yet, within Christianity and its formulation there has always been a concern for moving beyond the forms of religion and the language we use to describe God, in recognition that such forms and language serve a greater purpose. This greater purpose could be described as the adoration of God, the love of God, living from God, being transformed by God, expressing the life of God in the world. The language of our faith is the sort of language which *moves us beyond it*, whether it does this on a conscious or intuitive level. I became aware that the metaphor of the mirror is a way of talking about this. I would like to share this with you.

Before Christ, God was named in various ways, but it was affirmed within Judaism that God could not be imaged and the names were not God (Deut. 5:8-9). There was a primary image God provided in the human being. In Genesis 1 the Priestly creation narrative speaks of Humankind (Adam, male and female) as made in the image of God. One explanation of this which used to make sense to me was: as a king placed an image of himself in a city to represent his power and authority, so God placed humanity in God's world. However, I wondered as to whether this could mean more than this.

The Mirror

In medieval Christian and Islamic mysticism the metaphor of the human being as the *mirror of God* appears.⁸ The image of a reflective pond of water has been a part of Buddhism. This metaphor of the mirror also appears in Paul in I Cor. 13. Regarding I Cor. 13, I often wondered why Paul did not use a metaphor which would explain how hard it was to see and know God as God is, because to seek to know God is like *looking through* an unclear glass or through a pond of water, or something else. Why did Paul use the metaphor of the mirror where God is seen *in reflection*? The metaphor of the mirror does not just deal with the difficulty of *seeing God*, but with the difficulty of God *being seen in the world in something*. Where in the world is the reality of God reflected? The Bible, in speaking of the human as the image of God, presents *God as reflected in human life*, and that makes an important point. Then the human concern is not “how, where, and how well can I see God so that I may know and describe God,” but “How can my life and others best reflect the reality of God?”

In Greek the word used in I Cor. 13 describes a flat piece of metal, highly polished so that it would reflect. We think of a mirror as something that once made will continue to be reflective. However, in the case of the metal, it had to be sufficiently polished in order to reflect -- and it had to be kept polished, lest tarnishing make it difficult to see a reflection in it. Thus the metaphor of the mirror seems to be ideal to portray 1) where God is reflected and to be seen (in persons); 2) what one needs to be concerned with in order for God to be reflected (the polishing of the mirror so that it will have a reflective surface, the removal of tarnish); 3) that what is seen in the mirror is God, but not God God’s self, rather a reflection which is not to be equated with God; 4) that since the reflection takes place in humans and not merely in “nature”, the reflection must have something to do with life, activity, awareness, responsibility which are particular to being human and would not primarily have to do with God’s *being*. John 1 supports this latter point. For the Word, whose fullness (of grace and truthfulness) we have seen, is primarily the bringer of life and the right to be a child of God. *Thus the ethical would seem to move to the fore in the biblical metaphor of the mirror*. This is supported in I Cor. 13 which uses the mirror metaphor concerning our knowledge of God in a chapter primarily concerned with ethics, love.

Christ as Mirror

The potential for the human to be reflector of the image of God comes under question in Intertestamental Judaism and early Christianity. With the disappointment in humanity and the world that came to be part of Jewish and Christian dualism, the human is viewed as a poor representation of the image of God. Consequently, there develops in Jewish-Christian thought the heavenly Savior who can do what humans cannot and who is the true, original, or heavenly Adam, the restorer and judge of world and humanity. If one remembers the use of the term “Son of Man” (New Testament and the Apocalypse of Enoch) or “the Man” whom God has kept hidden in the heavens (II Esdras) or second “Adam” (Paul), it would seem to be clear that the use of these terms to name a heavenly redeemer is based upon the creation narratives. Since there are two creation narratives in Gen. 1-3, such a biblical interpreter as Philo of Alexandria understood the Man of Genesis 1 to be the ideal heavenly Man after the pattern of which the Adam of Genesis 2-3 was made (who is not a heavenly Man but one of the dust of the earth). Thus the original Adam/Man/Human would provide the ideal image (Gen. 1) and the human being made of the dust of earth, especially after having fallen, would provide a poor reflective surface. This then provides a background not only for New Testament anthropology, but also Christology.

To understand Christ as a *reflection* of the fullness of God provides a perspective on Christ and the Trinity which keeps in balance the relationship between the description of God and the God who is described and transcends descriptions. *That which is reflected is always beyond that in which it is reflected and the reflection itself, but the reflection is real and significant -- not just for allowing God to be seen, but allowing the life and activity of God to be seen.*

In Christ the image of the life of God was seen. In the image God became visible, but at the same time transcended the image (John 1 - the Logos transcends the incarnation). As portrayed in John, the humanity

⁸ . Ibid., p. 144.

of Jesus (the Incarnation) and his divinity (his being from heaven, Son of the Father) indicate that Immanence and Transcendence exist together at the same time. The two must be kept together. The tension or paradox cannot be resolved in favor of one or the other. The paradox is in the very nature of the reflection of God. Thus the Johannine presentation of this is more appropriate than the presentation of this as Virgin Birth in Matthew which in the history of theology has separated Jesus from ordinary humanity.

The Spirit and Transcendence

After the Incarnation, the Spirit was given which not only made possible the image in the mirror of humanity beyond Jesus (the presence of God in persons as presented in Luke-Acts), but clearly indicated that God could not be totally equated with the Incarnation. In a sense the Spirit was the unsaying and unknowing of the Word that was said and known in Jesus. Thus mystery was not lost in the Incarnation and the mystery is to be repeated in those who have the Spirit. To say that God transcends the Incarnation is like the statement in the Johannine Prologue that “the Logos is God” being surrounded by the statements on each side of it that “the Logos was *with* God”. Thus we cannot forget that whatever of God is seen in the Logos, the Logos is not to be completely identified with God because it was with God while it is God. In the same way the mystery of God before Incarnation and the mystery of God after Incarnation in the Spirit keeps us from completely identifying God with Jesus, though God was in Jesus and Jesus was God.

The Nature of the Human Mirror

The early church had to wrestle with what sort of reflection or how perfect a reflection might take place in humans. Some mysticism speaks of the complete polishing of the mirror so that the human disappears in ultimate mystical experience and union, only God being seen in the reflection. Thus the life which is reflected in the perfect mirror is only God. God lives in the mirror. Paul seems to disagree with this in I Cor. 13 and II Cor. 3-4.

Paul says in I Cor. 13:12 that we now see as in a mirror dimly (really the Greek means that we see in such a way that we cannot understand what we see) Using the same word which Paul uses for mirror, James 1:23 speaks of a man seeing his natural face in a mirror. These are the only usages of this word in the New Testament. In the LXX this word appears only in Wisdom literature: in Sirach 12:11 (we should be like one who has a polished mirror that is not hopelessly tarnished) and in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 (“Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.”). The LXX passages, as well as James, seem to support the ethical focus of the metaphor.

The images of II Corinthians are interesting. You are letters of recommendation, written on the heart with the Spirit (3:3), says Paul using a somewhat related metaphor. The splendor reflected in the face of Moses (3:7ff), who had seen God, was fading, and its diminishing nature was hidden by a veil over Moses’ face. The unbelievers’ minds are blinded to keep them from seeing the glory of Christ, who is the likeness (image) of God (4:4). “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”(4:6 - a passage which alludes to Genesis 1)

But this glory and image reflected in Christ are not to be seen in a completely polished, untarnished, human mirror. Rather, “... we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” And “we are afflicted in every way” (4:7ff). This has two implications. The first is that there is a polishing process going on. Affliction polishes the surface of the mirror and affects the reflection of the glory of God. Yet this will never be complete in this life. By this affliction we are being prepared for a more complete reflection of God’s glory. It is “preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen...”(4:18) The one who is in Christ (though having present limits) is a new creation in anticipation of the full realization of this and therefore is not now to be regarded merely from a human point of view (5:16ff). But in reality one remains human in this life and the reflection of God’s glory is incomplete.

Secondly, Paul indicates in several places that God is best seen in a human mirror which is sufficiently human, which is not completely polished, so that one can distinguish the God who transcends the human

from the human who is the medium for God's reflection. A perfectly polished mirror may become such a matter for attention that God is not seen. This is the point of II Cor. 4:7 which indicates that we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. Paul makes this point in I Cor. 1:26-31 where he says that God chose the weak that it might be clear that God is the source of all. In I Cor. 2:4 he indicates how he rejected rhetorical eloquence so that the reality of Christ crucified might be communicated and that his words might be with demonstration of God's Spirit and power and not the power of eloquence. In II Cor. 11-12 he boasts of his weaknesses for God's power is made perfect in weakness (12:9). Whereas the traditional mystical discussion of the mirror does stress that the polishing of the mirror means the disappearance of the self and the ego so that God can be reflected in the person who him- or herself can no longer be seen, Paul knows that it is best that our humanness remain (and we have little choice) so that God and God's reflection can be clearly distinguished from us, the mirror in which God is reflected. *The Christian concern then is not for a perfect mirror with nothing left of that which is human, but to take advantage of the imperfections of the mirror in this life to point beyond us to God who is the source of the reflection.*

In II Cor. the metaphors are mixed. There is the *writing on the heart* by the Spirit as God wrote on the tablets of the Law. There is the image of the *face*, functioning as a mirror. Moses' face reflects the glory of God which was fading. The glory of God is reflected from the face of Christ, to which unbelievers were blinded and which was veiled from them. Reflection is central to both these metaphors.

The biblical metaphors in II Cor. are not so much concerned with how the heart reflects the unsayable, the God who is beyond all language, but how the person reflects *the quality of the life of God*. Thus the concern is primarily ethical. But in II Cor. 4 there is also a concern for the way the reflection is affected by the conditions of life. The reflection does not overcome the condition of being human and the fact of suffering. The human will suffer, though never being overcome, bearing in the body both death and life. Thus to have the transcendent power in an earthen vessel still leaves the vessel earthen and exposed to the conditions of the world, though these conditions should never overcome the life one carries. Consequently the disclosure of God in the life of the person has to be seen in terms of its ultimate eschatological fulfillment, as well as the present (5:16ff).

The Nature of Faith

Though the Johannine Prologue and Paul are clear that the *fullness* of what has previously not been seen is to be found in Christ, faith is not merely response to the Incarnation which accepts it as true. The faith which is necessary for salvation is simple, merely an acceptance of what God has done in Christ as a gracious gift. But this may become merely assent to something or belief about something, the reality of which one is not willing to venture upon and live with. The ultimate implication of faith is that *one must be open to and trust the gift of the reality to which the assent of faith points*, a reality which one does not control. In faith which moves beyond understanding, description and assent, one controls nothing, constructs nothing, produces nothing, and in no way is justified by the act of faith. It is not knowledge of a truth or a fact, but faith in a reality which comes to one when one is open to it. Faith then is like the faith of Abraham who, in the face of the possible death of his son Isaac, believed in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist," (Rom. 4:17) -- which is hope against hope. *Thus to believe is ultimately to enter a time of no guarantee, of abandonment, or surrender of will and control, yet against the background of the promises of God, the manifestation in Christ, and the experience of God's people. The result of such faith is Spirit, which is the presence and experience of the reality of the Transcendent, of God.* If faith must go through processes and stages which are less than this, it must always move towards nothing less than this. In models of mysticism often kataphatic elements (having to do with images, words, explications) preceded the apophatic experience (the experience of the God behind the images and words), but the process did not stop with kataphasis. The fulfillment of completion of faith depends upon when one is ready and willing to venture upon the gifts of God. One cannot make faith into a sentimental feeling or an intellectual exercise.

Binding

Some of the mystical traditions speak of the *binding* of one's experience of God. This means that often one seeks to bind or limit the moment of faith and the description of faith to the way one has experienced

it and reflected upon it. Yet faith is not faith in the forms of faith and the statements about faith. Faith is ultimately openness to and the receiving of the reality of God, the Spirit, which transcends all forms and statements. Thus one must know the limits of “knowledge about” so that one does not give up that which (the One Who) knowledge is about in favor of limited descriptions (see Paul on knowledge in I Cor. 13:8-12 and I Cor 8:1-3). *Binding may mean that the language of faith becomes the barrier to faith or the box in which we seek to confine God, rather than letting God be God.*

Binding is not just a matter of trying to form the faith of others in the mould of one’s own experience and reflection, but it is also a problem for one’s own faith. Even one’s own faith cannot be kept always stuffed into the same box. We all long that life, faith and God stay ever the same. But though God does stay the same (i.e. it is always the same God), God enters into faith producing relationships with us in the *circumstances of life which are constantly changing*. We are deeply affected by the process of life and its changing circumstances. Also, when we believe, we do so out of the *growing cognitive and spiritual structures within us* which cause us not to see things the same. Thus faith cannot be boxed, wrapped, a nice ribbon put upon it, and then put upon a shelf to remain always as it was. Neither God nor life allows that. Time and life are like a naughty child who keeps taking down the box and breaking it open, though we try to forbid it. But in another way, the continual breaking open of the box can be seen as the gift of the God who has something in mind for us that cannot be met if we refuse transformation and new perspectives. *What the breaking of the forms of faith ultimately remind us is that faith is only a mirror in which God is reflected, which beacons us beyond the reflection to life with the Source of the reflection.*

What Else in the Mirror?

It is important to recognize that God is not all that might be reflected in the mirror. As stated above in the discussion of the “Nature of the Human Mirror,” since the mirror remains human, its humanity may also be described as seen or reflected in the mirror. But there is also the possibility of evil. If we accept the reality of evil in the world, in some persons the reality of evil, which also transcends the mirror, may be reflected. When this reflection is seen, others may be led to give themselves to it in a kind of faith.

If Paul’s location of reflection in the face is taken seriously (II Cor. 3-4), then one must be careful what one gazes upon lest it be the reality one reflects.

The metaphor of the mirror is only one that might be used to describe the way the transcendent is present in life and in persons. Another is the presence of God, Christ, the Spirit, or evil *within* one. Another is being *in* Christ. Yet I find the metaphor of the mirror very helpful.

The Dejudaising and Dehistoricising of Jesus

To lose our sense of the historical particularity of Jesus is to lose contact with his otherness and therefore to avoid our need to deal with otherness. Thus the spiritualization of Jesus makes it easy to identify him with our purposes and our cultural and racial community.

The history of Christian art, before the modern period with its sense of history, often represented Jesus as a person of the times of the artist set in contexts from the times of the artist. This both dehistoricised and dejudaised Jesus. In a good sense this recognized the truth that the resurrected Jesus transcended the Incarnation or historical expression of his life and was no longer an Aramaic speaking Jew with a Galilean accent: he was contemporary. Thus he belonged to every time. On the other hand this prevented persons from recognizing that he was racially other than most Christians today. Each Christmas in Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem, PA, a beautiful nativity painting is displayed in the front of the Church with a blond, curly-haired, blue-eyed baby Jesus. It is interesting that all of the other characters in the scene are closer to historical accuracy than Jesus.

There is another type of dehistoricising where Jesus becomes transcendent in the theology of the church. Jesus as Adam (Apocalyptic Son of Man) from heaven and as the Logos (equivalent to Wisdom as a

personified extension of God)⁹ became quite other than the humanity of those who followed him. But persons often came to prefer this transcendent and divine person because this transcendent Other was one by whom they could be blessed and from whom they could benefit since he was not like them. A divine otherness is always easier to bear than a human otherness. By avoiding his human otherness they did not need to come to terms with the otherness of human others who were humanly different. Paul knew that this transcendent otherness, if appropriately grasped by humans, could help in the transcending of human otherness (neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female - Gal. 3:26) and break through human barriers and walls of division (Eph. 2:14), calling upon Christians to love others who were different. And yet it was so easy to identify Jesus with the Christ of their experience rather than the Jesus of history and forget that the one who was in them, and in whom they were, had yet been historically different from them. Paul's statement in II Corinthians that we no longer regard Christ from a human point of view (5:16) but that our loyalty must be to the historical Jesus (not just the resurrected Christ or the experience of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:3) shows the tension between being loyal to religious experience and historical event.

I have found that one way to be loyal to the historical Jesus is to imagine him as having a pimple on one cheek. I don't know for sure what he looked like. He probably had a beard and long hair, but then immediately I see popular paintings in my mind and I lose the real Jesus. His skin was probably olive, at least darker than mine. I don't know his stature. But if I can't imagine what he looked like and the character of his Galilean accent, the pimple on his cheek keeps him from turning into something merely esoteric, spiritual, and ideal. He must have had a pimple at some time, and for me that keeps him rooted in history and a concrete person, other than I, rather than the product of my imagining.

The cross for Paul was something like this. It was an intriguing element of the history of Jesus that could not be denied (though we have now made crosses look nice). Paul says that Jews wanted a sign (an authenticating display of God's power), Greeks wanted wisdom (which one might say represented a desire for truth apart from history, a more abstract truth), and God gave a cross which was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (I Cor. 1:18-25). For Paul this became a paradigm for understanding God. The cross would always call one back to history and what was beyond one's own world-view and preconceptions. Thus all the boundaries that one sets break down at the cross.

One way in which Jesus was dehistoricised was by the attempt to systematize and translate his teachings from his original idiom. This was true for Matthew who gathered Jesus' sayings into large collections and made of Jesus a new Moses delivering a new Torah from a new Sinai (Sermon on the Mount, 5-7): and Jesus' sayings now become commandments (28:20) which could be arranged topically. Many of Jesus' sayings were also spiritualized, so that the poor and hungry of Luke 6 were interpreted to be the poor in spirit and hungry for righteousness of Matthew 5. The coming of the Kingdom in Matt. 6:10, Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, was spiritualized in the rhyming addition to "Thy Kingdom come": "The will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus was removed from the political and social issues which seemed to play a significant role in Mark and Luke. Matthew does include the material from Mark 7-8 describing Jesus' experimental mission to the Gentiles (see below), but ignores its implication, asserting that Jesus told his disciples only to go to the household of Israel (10:6) during his ministry. In Matthew Jesus then gives the Gentile mission to his disciples only after his resurrection, in the Great Commission. This therefore removes Jesus from the political and revolutionary issues of his time which during Jesus' own ministry played a significant role in the Markan description.

⁹. Although Logos is used in Wisdom literature as an equivalent of Wisdom/Sophia, it is intriguing to ask the question as to why John in his Prologue (1:1-18) chose to use the term Logos instead of Sophia. There are similarities between John 1 and Sirach 24 where the usual feminine imagery of Wisdom is clear. But in John the use of Logos removes all feminine characterization in favor of a term that is masculine in gender but more neutral or transcendent in implication. It is only in the incarnation that the Word becomes historical, but not quite. There is this strange otherness to Jesus in John where he knows that he comes from the Father, goes back to the Father, and that he was before Abraham. In the Gospel this is maintained in tension with his human characteristics, but his transcendence becomes his primary identity. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the anti-Jewish nature of the Gospel. In this way Jesus belonged less to the Jews who are portrayed as opposing him. But he also became less historical.

Another way in which Jesus was dehistoricised, particularly by the second century, was to make Jesus into a Western philosophical thinker presenting systems of thought and ethics. We often understand Jesus this way today.

While refusing to dehistoricise Jesus in a sense keeps him other than us and retains his identity, it also may tie him to a history not ours and no longer his. If he was raised from the dead and if there was in him what is eternal, then he now lives and acts within the sphere of the context of the present and addresses our issues within that context. Jesus as contemporary is then released from the bonds of a purely historical understanding. Thus his integrity is not only preserved by responsibility to his historical character but by acknowledging his freedom from it and holding in balance his history and his transcendence which for us makes him wonderfully immanent.

What If?? Some Hermeneutical Questions about Jesus

It is the function of historical criticism as applied to the biblical materials to make us responsible to their original meaning, to seek to understand them in terms of the intent of the author and the context in and to which they were addressed. Yet our model of historical criticism is affected by certain paradigms and presuppositions which are a part of our culture. In the West we are greatly affected by the heritage of the Greco-Roman world and its philosophical methodologies. Especially since the Enlightenment we have been affected not only by a revival of interest in ancient philosophical questions, but the presuppositions of Rationalism, Empiricism, and the development of the historical and natural sciences. In more recent times our paradigms have frequently become existential and psychological, a procedure which does raise both the questions of the historical meaning and the meaning of the text for today. Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament is a primary example of existential interpretation while John Sanford, or Carl Jung himself, are examples of Jungian psychological interpretation (see Jung's *Answer to Job* and Sanford's *The Kingdom Within*).¹⁰

In Western Christian mentality since the 18th century our paradigm has often emphasized finding the truth, expressing it in concepts and systems, arguing as to the value of something by its historical and rational validity and provability. We have believed that truth can be expressed conceptually and refined until it is conceptually correct. To believe is to know and understand the truth. These presuppositions have often fitted well with the Protestant understanding that truth is to be found embodied in the inspired words of Scripture.

The fundamental question posed by the following "what ifs?" is: how would the biblical materials be understood if we accepted that Jesus and the earliest church, before it acclimated itself to the Roman world, operated with an Eastern rather than a Western paradigm? This paradigm can be found today in Mid-Eastern areas where the Eastern paradigm of teaching is preserved much like it was in the first century.¹¹ It can also be found in the mystical traditions of Eastern religions which, when read, seem to shed interesting light on many of the biblical sayings. It can also, to some extent, be found within the different approach to the Christian faith embodied within the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Whether you would agree with the implication of the following questions or not, it might be helpful to use them as a foil over against which to clarify your own paradigm for the Gospel materials.

1. What if Jesus thought in Eastern rather than in Western ways?
2. What if Jesus' life was a life lived to be pondered, an incarnation of the inexpressible, raising questions to keep us from all idolatries which could make ultimate anything but God and God's concern for humanity?

¹⁰ C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1973. John Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings*, NY: Paulist Press, 1970.

¹¹ See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976.

3. What if Jesus' parables and stories were riddles to puzzle and engage, birthing various answers for those who struggled with their meaning rather than making expressing particular conceptual truths?
4. What if Jesus used hyperbole to shock and told some sayings as "koans", to catch and puzzle the mind, to stop it from thinking thoughts so that it might meet God? ¹²
5. What if Jesus called us to meet God and live from God rather than understand God?
6. What if Jesus spoke many ways to different people in many contexts? What if Jesus used paradox to reflect life's nature? What if we can't systematize his teachings?
7. What if we take seriously that Jesus did not write and that he left his disciples only some parables, stories, and assorted sayings (later collected)? Why didn't he leave us more if the central concern was to know just what he said and to follow his teachings rather than to "meet his truth"? Why didn't he order his teachings into a system of truth?
8. What if Jesus calls everyone, like his disciples, to engage in their personal spiritual journey with him rather than to find in his teachings ready-made answers?

¹². One of the most famous Koans in Buddhism is:

A monk in all seriousness asked Joshu: "Has a dog Buddha-nature or not?" Joshu retorted "Mu!" [Buddha-nature is that nature which underlies all things and which enables all sentient beings to become Buddha.]

Philip Kapleau in *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) says:

Every koan is a unique expression of the living, indivisible Buddha-nature which cannot be grasped by the bifurcating intellect. Koans appear bewildering to people who cherish the letter above the spirit. Those who grasp their spirit know that koans, despite the incongruity of their various elements, are profoundly meaningful. All point to man's Face before his parents were born, to his real Self.

Koans take as their subjects tangible, down-to-earth objects such as a dog, a tree, a face, a finger to make us see, on the one hand, that each object has absolute value and, on the other, to arrest the tendency of the intellect to anchor itself in abstract concepts. But the import of every koan is the same: that the world is one interdependent Whole and that each separate one of us is that Whole.

The complete solution of a koan involves the movement of the mind from a state of Ignorance (delusion) to the vibrant inner awareness of living Truth. This implies the emergence into the field of consciousness of the immaculate Bodhi-mind, which is the reverse of the mind of delusion. The determination to struggle with a koan in the first place is generated by faith in the reality of the Bodhi-mind, the struggle itself being the effort of this Mind to case off the shackles of Ignorance and come to its own Self-knowledge. (pp. 64-65)

Yasutani-Roshi, in his commentary on the koan "Mu", says:

You must melt down your delusions with the red-hot iron ball of Mu stuck in your throat. The opinions you hold and your worldly knowledge are your delusions. Included also are philosophical and moral concepts, no matter how lofty, as well as religious beliefs and dogmas, not to mention innocent commonplace thoughts. In short, all conceivable ideas are embraced within the term "delusions" and as such are a hindrance to the realization of your Essential-nature. So dissolve them with the fireball of Mu! (Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, pp. 79-80.)

It is interesting that in Mark 4 where Jesus' parable about the sower is recorded and other parables of the Kingdom (Jesus presentation of ultimate reality) are given, the early church felt it necessary to include an interpretation of the parable of the sower so that Jesus parable would be "understood" and most modern translators translate Mark 4:11 as "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God" instead of "the mystery of the Kingdom of God."

9. What if God intends us to live from the ambiguity and variety contained in the New Testament, to live and grow from it, and to be drawn by it, beyond it, to relationship with God?

If we had more, Jesus' very words in his Aramaic language ready for our translation, teachings coherent, without difference and paradox, would we have more than we do now? How would the more change the nature of the Christian faith and life? Would we need God and Jesus when it was all there in writing? Would we even talk about the contemporary Spirit of God? How would having all the answers affect our relationships with and openness to others? Would we then be able to say that it is only the Lord we can boast of, only the Lord God who is the source of our life (I Cor. 1:30-31)? Would we then forget love and be puffed up in our knowledge? Would we think that salvation is within our control?

The Record of the Geographical Spread of Early Christianity

Something that seems to have very immediate implications for our understanding of church and Christian faith is the way the history of the early church is presented.

It is natural that the growth and movement of Christianity which is described in the New Testament is West and North because of the importance of Greece and Rome. This may also have been affected by the strong influence of Paul and his associates, together with the preservation of the Pauline letters, and Luke's investment in the Pauline mission if Luke was an associate of Paul. I have difficulty imagining that the ignoring of the development of Christianity in Africa was intentional, but it certainly has had its consequences. I have often wondered how different the development of early Christianity might have been (or been described) if Anthony had beaten Octavian (Augustus) at the Battle of Actium and the center of the Roman Empire would have become Alexandria rather than Rome. Would then the history of the early church have been described as moving South and would European Christianity have to argue for its place in history?

Luke in Acts, though including Egypt, Libya and Cyrene amongst the places from which pilgrims came who were present at Pentecost (2:10),¹³ speaks clearly of the developmental process towards Europe: from Jerusalem, to Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8): "to the ends of the earth" is to proceed from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 28:28). I wonder why Galilee is bypassed. This is amazing to me because of the tradition of Jesus' appearances in Galilee in Mark, Matthew and John (Luke does not include this in his Gospel). Certainly nothing is said of the significant spread of Christianity to Africa, except for the brief mention of the treasurer of the Ethiopian Queen (8:27). Though Samaria, between Judaea and Galilee, is included as a stage in the inclusion of the Gentiles, the movement is West.

It would seem to me that we must always keep before us that Acts presents to us a very limited story of the development of the early church, even in its spread West. Without keeping this in mind we do not remember that there are many whose story has not been told, particularly those involved in the spread of Christianity East and South. If we only think in terms of the West we confuse our traditions with those of the whole church. We must go beyond the canon to know the true geographical spread, multi-racial character, and rich variety of early Christianity. This is only possible, I believe, if we approach the New Testament historically. We cannot presuppose that God designed things this way because this is all God wanted us to know.

Communication

I have become aware of the complexity involved in communication and the patience and persistence which are necessary if one would communicate meanings and not merely words. I share with the reader two charts.

Both of these charts have come out of the struggle for communication and reflection upon it. The first is related to my teaching and counseling experience. It is usually a while before students understand me

¹³. Undoubtedly this was intended by Luke as symbolic of the universality of the Christian experience and its ultimate spread to the ends of the earth.

more than the mere transmission of information. To help to facilitate understanding I hand out at the beginning of each course a statement of my own personal beliefs and my expectations and understanding of the course. In seeking to understand my students I have to listen carefully and gradually until what they are communicating within the framework of the words they use dawns on me. When I counsel others, I now accept it as my standard experience that much careful listening to the counselee will only result in understanding after some time when the meaning of what was shared dawns on me. It is almost that communication needs an incubation period in the recipient so that the intended and unintended communication (mind and heart) of the other can take shape and come to life within the recipient.

The second chart concerns evangelism. It came into being late one night after leading a seminar of Europeans Moravians on the contemporary relevance of the Moravian heritage. That day we had dealt specifically with evangelism. We had some difficulties communicating with each other since some did not understand or speak English well, and I had difficulty speaking German. The chart was the attempt to put into visible form much of what had been discussed.

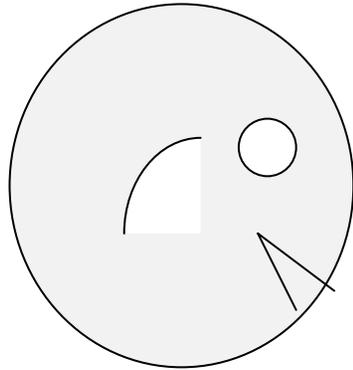
The issues of these charts are, from my perspective, crucial for ministry, for in so many ways ministry as a whole, not only preaching, is communication.

COMMUNICATION

PERSON I

Experiences, Feelings and Expectations

Cultural, Customary, and Personal Word Meanings



AUTHENTICITY & INTEGRITY may convince before understanding takes place
AUTHORITY may circumvent the need for understanding

Words and Gestures with intended meaning

Heard in terms of customary meanings and expectations of listener

Process of clarification, realization, and "dawning" of meanings
IT TAKES TIME
and thus **good will and trust** help the process

Logical process - abstract and principled or oriented to personal and people values

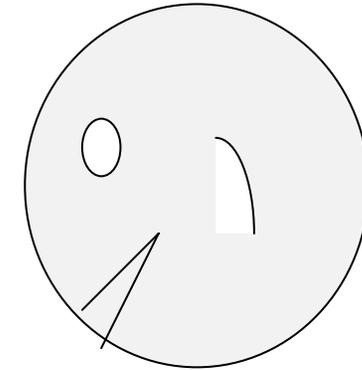
Perception process - observant of details or affected by expectations of inner intuition
Intuition observes some things, but quickly stops observing and by inner knowledge presupposes or constructs what something means.

Introvert or extrovert process
In *introvert* processes one thinks within and communicates something when the process is done

PERSON II

Experiences, Feelings and Expectations

Cultural, Customary and Personal Word Meanings



Logical process - abstract and principled or oriented to personal and people values

Perception process - observant of details or affected by expectations of inner intuition

Introvert or extrovert process
In *extrovert* processes one thinks aloud by talking, and one should not consider this expression a communication until the person is finished with the processing.

Some persons are comfortable with the give and take of **unstructured** communication, but some are insistant upon precision and **careful, precise** expression.

AFFECTED BY **RESPONSIBILITIES TO OTHERS**: THEIR INTENTIONS, MEANINGS, AND INTERESTS

Communication is
WE
Living in relationship with Jesus, Father, Spirit
in
Christian Community
and in time and culture
speaking
from experience, insight, history
to
OTHERS
in time and culture
with their histories and experiences
who also, by creation, belong to God
and in whose lives God is active
seeking
to communicate and interpret
not just information
but the experience and dynamics
of
being with God and others in life
so that
others may be aware
of God's reconciling world to God's Self
and God's provision of resources
in relationship
for LIFE and the PRESENT
but also
may experience the power of God's future.

Sermon: The Way of Christ's Suffering

[Sermon delivered March 16, 1991, Faith and Order Working Group, NCCCUSA, Dallas, Texas]

Lent leads us along the tortuous path of Christ's suffering and death and beyond, to the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. This models the Christian life which draws deeply upon this whole journey, thus helping us to enter into the realities of our own suffering and the victory of the resurrection and the Spirit. Most of us would like to make the journey quickly, staying as briefly as possible in the sufferings of Jesus, and our own, basking in the power of the resurrection and the Spirit, overcoming and transcending life's problems. And yet life does not seem to go that way. When Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah Jesus told Peter of his coming suffering, but Peter would not have it. Peter knew what was coming. If Jesus' life would be that way, his would need be also.

How quickly can we move from Jesus' suffering to the resurrection? How soon can we leave the harsh realities of the cross behind us? Several weeks ago I was able to visit a display of part of the quilt commemorating those who have died with AIDS. Before me stretched the patchwork of the lives of real people, portrayed in panels that included photos, personal articles, and the words of those who loved them. It lay upon the floor in large blocks so that persons might walk between its segments, was hung upon the walls and stretched through the air across the auditorium. When I first saw it the cumulative suffering woven into the panels was almost overwhelming. It will be a long time before the human community can move beyond the suffering of these panels to a world where AIDS no longer destroys and God seems powerful again. And yet in the words sewn into panels and written there, there was resurrection and hope ---- though suffering was never transcended. It was as if resurrection and the cross, suffering and hope, pain and peace were woven together into a whole where one could not exist without the other.

Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled* begins:

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult -- once we truly understand and accept it -- then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.¹

Well, it is not that simple. To know that life is difficult does not relieve its pain, but it does help us to live with it, to regard difficulty and crisis as normal. We do not flee real life to some imaginary utopia from which we cannot affect and engage the difficulties of life. We do not waste time pretending life should not be that way. As Jesus faced his own life, we too know what life can be and we are there, to live fully within it.

John the Baptist at the beginning of John's Gospel says of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This confession of the Baptist has behind it Isaiah's vision of the lamb who bears the sins of the world (Is. 53). This theme is important in John's Gospel where Jesus' death is relocated so that Jesus dies at same time as paschal lambs in the Temple. The two passages which are our texts, Rev. 5:6-10 and John 20:24-29, both contain faith statements about how being the wounded Lamb of God relates to the future of God and life. They both have to do with the debate over the theology of the cross, which takes Jesus' suffering and ours seriously, and the theology of glory, which sees all of life as victory and God's participation in it as power-full. The history of the New Testament and of Christian history might be written around this debate. In the New Testament the Corinthians, part of the community behind the Gospel of John, and Luke in Acts wanted to see God as power and life as victory. Paul had to remind the Corinthians of the centrality of the cross (I Cor. 1) and the author of John has his own answer.

¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

In Rev. 5:6-10 Christ is the lamb who was slain and stood next to God's throne "as though it had been slain". Because it was slain and had ransomed persons for God, it was worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll of history. Though once slain, it is now transformed into the conquering ram of Jewish Apocalyptic and will initiate the process by which God's horrible judgement will be unleashed on the world. The cross back there is now over, and the resurrected one receives power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing (5:12).

The Gospel of John is quite different. Undoubtedly those who saw Jesus that Easter morning had hoped that the suffering and terrors of the crucifixion were all over and could be left in the past. But Jesus appears to them and shows them the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound in his side. At first one might think this was just to convince his disciples of who he was. However, it is not this simple when one reads the chapter carefully. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and here the wounds are not mentioned. He asks her not to hold him back for he has not yet ascended to his Father, he has not completed his resurrection. After his Ascension, in the evening, he returns and brings his wounds from heaven with him to show them to his disciples. Thomas, who was not there, says that he will not believe unless he sees the wounds. Eight days later Jesus appears again to Thomas and the disciples and invites him to touch his wounds. Two generations later the author of I John remembers this when speaking of the Gospel which came from the life-time of Jesus:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon **and touched with our hands**, concerning the word of life ... (1:1)

It is the heavenly Christ who bears the wounds and is both raised and still wounded. This was John's answer to those who would forget the significance of the wounded Jesus and turn all into power and resurrection. Thus he who bears true witness (John 19:34-35) saw the water and blood come from his side that you also may believe in his woundedness. It is amazing that the Johannine Jesus who is conscious of his own preexistence and has the power to lay down and take up his own life still bears the wounds. Thus the crucifixion of Jesus is also his exaltation in Johannine theology.

Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, foster father of the eighteenth century Moravian Church and a significant theologian, following the insights of Luther and of John, saw all that is Christian in the light of the wounded Saviour:

For the Saviour is never in all eternity without His sign, without His wounds: the public showing has His holy wounds as its ground. If we, therefore, want to invite people to the marriage, if we want to describe the Bridegroom, it must be said like this: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus as He hung upon the cross (I Cor. 2:2, alt.), as He was wounded. I point you to His nail prints, to the side, to the hole which the spear pierced open in His side. As soon as this look strikes your heart, you run to the marriage feast ...²

And again:

If we speak of the cross in the congregation, so we mean a certain form, a certain style and fashion, in which the Saviour, the God over all, the Creator of all things, has appeared in this present time. He rules and does what he wants; he gives us life and breath, he makes us healthy, he keeps us, he preserves us, he conquers sin and every earthly need for us, he carries out his decree for our salvation as it was foreknown by him from eternity: but all that, my sisters and brothers, he does for now in the cross-form. One must not try to present that as a way of power, a kingly method, a despotism striking to the eyes: he is a despot, but in the cross-form. Everything appears according to the fact that he is a Lamb who endures, who is so patient, lamblike, open, contented, self-composed, gentle if it does not go his way ...³

². Nicholas Ludwig Count von Zinzendorf, *Nine Public Lectures on Important Subjects in Religion*, (9/4/46), ed. and transl. by George W. Forell, Iowa City: U. of Iowa Press, 1973, p. 28.

³. Nicholas Ludwig Count von Zinzendorf, *Vier und dreissig Homilien über die Wunden-Litaney der Brüder, gehalten auf dem Herrnhaag in den Sommer-Monathen 1747*, n.d., (5/14/47), pp. 60f.

For Zinzendorf God in the cross had forever renounced the use of power: in contrast to the Old Testament, God will no longer force souls -- a denial of imperialism in evangelism. God's enfleshment in Christ sets the pattern of all human development. The Church cannot be an institution of power nor can its forms be unchanging for it lives the paradigm of the dying and rising Saviour. It is constituted by those who gather around the cross. In the search for religious truth we must hear the message of the cross which appeals to the knowledge of the heart rather than the power of human intellect. In fact, the Gospel is contra-rational. The cross, with the resurrection, provides the paradigm of our own existence, both dying and rising. Moreover, it testifies to the fact that God is never other than the one whom we meet upon the cross. There is no other God and no other way of God's being God. As Zinzendorf says:

If I prove from the suffering of God that he again has risen, then I have all rational persons on my side, for Sheol and God don't long suit each other. I do not prove out of his resurrection that he died for my sins nor that he is God, for already many have risen, but none has died for me. For him who is on the cross, who remains my God, would I scorn the whole world.⁴

I must confess, if it were not for the cross I could not have God for life does not bear witness to a God of power and glory, but a God of gentle mystery who as the wounded one is present in life and its woundedness.

I must confess that if it were not for the cross I could not believe in the resurrection, for the power of God is seldom present as pure power, but most often in my weakness, for

...we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (II Cor. 4:7-10)

I must confess that if it were not for the cross I could not believe in the church, for it lives in the paradox of its weakness and God's power and is always dying and rising.

I must confess that were it not for the cross I could not believe in the Bible, for the strange combination of incarnation and Spirit is what I find as I try to hear there God's word.

I must confess that without the cross I would be disillusioned when I stand for justice for justice is not always successful.

I must confess that without the cross I would have little understanding of that subtle power of God in the midst of the realities of life which can touch the human heart, while often a more powerful or understandable sign is sought (I Cor. 1).

George Rouault, that French mystical artist whose paintings look like stained glass windows, who portrayed human suffering in the faces of judges, clowns and prostitutes, saw in the crucifixion God's sharing in human suffering. In *De Profundis*, "Out of the depths", he portrays a wife and child kneeling at the deathbed of the father and husband. There is a slight glimpse of the world outside through a small window, but what is important is within the room. On the wall there hangs a crucifix which gathers to itself the suffering of those within the room. There is a mystical bond between the Jesus on the cross and the suffering family.

We cannot too quickly move from the story of the suffering Jesus to the resurrection. In fact it seems that we must keep the two together to speak the truth of what we know: our God is a dying rising God and a rising dying God. In Christ God took both humanity and suffering into heaven to retain it there forever.

⁴. *Büdingische Sammlung*, III, *Anmerkungen von der sogenannten Brüder-Gemeinen 1744*, Büdingen: J.C. Stöhr, 1742, p. 746.

Rouault, in a series of engravings called "Miserere", in bold black lines draws a crucified Christ, head limp against his shoulder, arms stretched above his head: a dying Christ whose form moves powerfully out of the picture. Underneath the engraving is a quotation from Pascal:

Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world;
we must not sleep during that time.