

## *An Alternative To Church As Usual*

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Our discussion went on for nearly two hours. The pain in ministry was expressed in example after example. Pastors—competent, committed, working hard, even loved and respected by the community—were nonetheless seeing little or no church growth; the traditional congregation in instance after instance was dying. I was one of only two pastors in the circle; the others served the church in the academy. Finally, the group leader turned to me and said, “In all of this discussion about the pain of ministry and grim prospects for the church, you’ve not said anything.”

It was true; I had said nothing. I am not unaware of heartbreak, disillusionment, and despair in the ranks of clergy colleagues, frustration among laity, unrest in congregations, but the experience is foreign to me. I have had quite the opposite experience: delight in ministry; the joy of growth; a flourishing community rich in gifts, supportive, positive in spirit—making ministry for me a challenging, fulfilling vocation. Two decades of pastoral experience in the congregation I presently serve have seen the numbers multiply nearly five times over. The giving has grown proportionately, the site and facility expanded, and a large team is now engaged in creative ministry. Now, as I enter my fourth decade of pastoral ministry, I do so with greater zest, confidence, and joy than when ordaining hands set me aside for this task.

I had listened and felt the hurt. I knew I had no answer, no formula for success, no quick fix to make the pain go away and turn it all around. Further, I, too, wonder about the future of the institutional forms of the church which, not only at the local level, but even more critically at the level of denominational structures, are experiencing sickness unto death. I felt disinclined to give some triumphalistic testimony of success in ministry.

Someone suggested I write a piece explaining what people are fleeing when they come to Christ Community Church. I resist that idea lest it appear that large numbers have joined from other congregations, which really is not the case. Yet,

there are many among us who have fled the *institutional* church at some point; they have simply dropped out, despairing of finding an authentic spirituality and sensing that the church was a source of manipulation and coercion, imposing shame and reinforcing guilt, rather than offering release from it. They found the church to be ever so much like a dysfunctional family.

Others have fled the reactionary posture of the church on contemporary issues, the slowness of the church to address matters of human sexuality, feminist concerns, and concerns for justice and peace. Weary of fighting, waging battles about questions on which contemporary society has reached a responsible consensus, some have left the church with bitterness and cynicism. Yet, eventually the hunger for spiritual reality sets them on a quest and many have found a home and kindred seekers in this community.

We have welcomed many others who sense they had been cut off, rejected. The human situation is messy. At some point most folks color outside the lines; traditional expectations are shattered. And, too often, precisely at that point, the church is awkward, daring not to reach out and embrace lest it appear to sanction the life beyond the pale. If not in word, perhaps in body language, a person stained with grit picked up along the way senses he or she threatens accepted morality and the proper mode of behavior.

I like to speak of Christ Community as “an alternative to church as usual.” Over and over again, witness is borne to the tangible experience of “something different.” To flesh out the ingredients that create the alternative is not an easy task, and I hesitate even to try, lest, defining too specifically, that elusive spirit be lost, becoming one more “formula for success.”

What follows renders no formula, and what is proffered comes with the acknowledgment that Christ Community is fragile, flawed, and riddled with weaknesses. It is simply the story of a pastor and a congregation over two decades.

The story actually begins in 1960 when I became the pastor of this congregation for the first time after seminary graduation. During those first four years of preaching and pastoral work, the theology with which I entered the ministry was tempered by concrete experience.

Mary was a bright, lovely high school girl. She was one of those exceptions to the rule; her parents had nothing to do with the church, but she did—on her own. She was in worship, church school, and youth groups. She had a significant spiritual experience, was baptized, made a good confession. She was radiant and I was her spiritual guardian. For summer work, she left the community to join a friend whose mother was a strong Mormon. When she returned, she was in spiritual turmoil. I cited the Scriptures; she the Book of Mormon; two authorities and an impasse. I lost her and I was shattered.

In that experience, I came to see that my every claim was banked on the person's accepting the authority of the Bible as the exclusive source of saving truth. Otherwise, I was stumped. The foundation of my theological system was beginning to crumble.

Moving to a conservative congregation in the East, I began to research the nature of biblical authority. At that time, the Reformed Church cooperated in the publication of a new curriculum for church school, and it was introduced by study papers that dealt with the questions of Scripture's normative function in the church and scriptural interpretation. I became convinced that my own understanding of biblical authority was untenable; if I were to continue to preach, I needed a new basis upon which to do it. Evangelical passion was possible for me only if it could be coupled with intellectual integrity. I needed to find "my gospel" or I knew I would never be able to preach with power and authority, with a note of authenticity.

That was the existential quest that led me to pursue graduate study in the Netherlands. Hendrikus Berkhof, then professor of dogmatics at the University of Leiden, agreed to become my mentor in a doctoral program in which my major area was the history of dogma. Hearing my questions and sensing the nature of my quest, his first assignment for me was to read Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I.1-2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. I was amazed; Barth took the Scriptures seriously, as seriously as I had ever experienced. I thought to myself, one day conservative Christian thinkers will run to Barth for refuge, if ever they discover the dynamic of this great mind and heart. I read with a voracious appetite. Pages 522 and 523 of that volume lie open before me now, dog-eared, as much underlined as not, margins full of my jottings as I struggled to understand Barth. Barth writes,

The Reformers' doctrine of inspiration is an honoring of God, and of the free grace of God. The statement that the Bible is the Word of God is on this view no limitation, but an unfolding of the perception of the sovereignty in which the Word of God condescended to become flesh for us in Jesus Christ, and a human word in the witness of the prophets and apostles as witnesses to His incarnation. (p. 522)

As the passion and vitality of the sixteenth-century Reformers' experience was replaced by the second-hand experience of their spiritual heirs, there was an effort to establish certitude of faith through a high doctrine of inspiration. Barth contends that the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" was transformed from a statement about the free grace of God into a statement about the nature of the Bible "as exposed to human inquiry brought under human control."

Barth goes on to point out that the eventual historical investigation of the Bible in the Enlightenment period was simply a logical consequence of viewing the Bible as under human control rather than as available as the instrument of God's

revelation by God's free grace. He gives a thorough review of the history of the elevation of the doctrine of inspiration. I found myself in Barth's description:

But ever more clearly and definitely a certainty was sought and found quite different from the spiritual certainty which could satisfactorily have been reached on these lines, and which on these lines would have been recognized as the only certainty but also as real certainty. What was wanted was a tangible certainty and not a divine, a certainty of work and not solely of faith. In token of this change there arose the doctrine of inspiration of the high orthodoxy of the 17th century. (Ibid., p. 524)

And the consequences?

Should there be found even the minutest error in the Bible, then it is no longer wholly the Word of God, and the inviolability of its authority is destroyed. (Ibid.)

Barth rejected the attempts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to make the Scriptures the object of historical investigation as one might investigate any literary piece, and he rejected, as well, the attack on the seventeenth-century's supernaturalism. He insisted,

We must attack it rather because its supernaturalism is not radical enough. The intention behind it [seventeenth-century supernaturalism] was ultimately only a single and in its own way very "naturalistic" postulate that the bible must offer us a *divina et infallibilis historia*; that it must not contain human error in any of its verses; that in all its parts and the totality of its words and letters as they are before us it must express divine truth in a form in which it can be established and understood; that under the human words it must speak to us the Word of God in such a way that we can at once hear and read it as such with the same obviousness and directness with which we can hear and read other human words.... The Bible was now grounded upon itself apart from the mystery of Christ and the Holy Ghost. It became a "paper Pope," and unlike the living Pope in Rome it was wholly given up into the hands of its interpreters. It was no longer a free and spiritual force, but an instrument of human power. And in this form the Bible became so like the holy book of other religions, for which something similar had always been claimed, that the superiority of its claim could not be asserted in relation to them or to the many achievements of the human spirit generally.... The intention of establishing the authority of the Bible along these lines was to avoid historical relativism, but it opened up the way to it, and theology and Church did not hesitate for a moment to tread that way. In content the 17th century doctrine of inspiration asserted things which cannot be maintained in face of a serious reading and exposition of what the Bible itself says about itself, and in face of an honest appreciation of the facts of

its origin and tradition. Therefore the postulate on which 17th century man staked everything proved incapable of fulfillment (Ibid., pp. 525-26)

I was reading my own spiritual biography; the existential pastoral experience that had exposed the vulnerability of my own theological position and triggered the serious search for a new basis for preaching and pastoral care led me to the discovery that I had fallen into the very pitfall against which Barth warned.

I struggled. Berkhof watched me dangle. I wanted him to give me answers, to solve the mystery of biblical authority. He only smiled and let me keep working. He did tell me he, too, had walked the path I was on, but I would have to find my own way. He was not forthcoming with answers but was most helpful in aiding me to clarify the questions.

I remember suggesting I should write my dissertation on this matter. I was convinced there would be little theological progress on any front if in the RCA we were not freed from a doctrine of inspiration that, for all the protestations, looked suspiciously like the seventeenth-century version Barth attributed to the orthodox who lost the vitality of faith by lusting for certainty they could control. He responded simply, "Do you realize what they will do to you?"

My dissertation subject did not develop in the area of biblical authority, but I did come to an understanding that enabled me to remain under the authority of Scripture as Word of God while recognizing as well the human nature of that witness and the continuing work of God's Spirit making the witness the Word of God here and now.

Just as I was forging a new foundation for preaching and pastoral care, I experienced a personal crisis, a painful divorce and breakup of my family. It seemed my future ministry was in jeopardy just when I felt more strongly than ever the desire to engage in the ministry of the Word. Then the congregation I first served, which is the Spring Lake, Michigan, congregation I still serve, invited me to return, an act of grace and, for me, the greatest confirmation of my call to ministry I have ever experienced.

Grace became a tangible human experience. Grace was incarnate in this people. They touched me and I knew the touch of God. They took me in, supported me in the care of my three small children, believed in me, and through them, I was healed. That took courage, for in 1971 that was a radical thing to do. That is where it all started, I believe, for my experience became a paradigm for the ministry of grace in this congregation.

Two decades of exhilarating pastoral ministry have issued from a mediation of grace from people to pastor. The conjunction of intensive theological reflection and concrete human experience created the occasion for a congregation to become an alternative to church as usual. That combination continues to be fruitful as we strive to live into our name, Christ Community, a name we chose in

1971 to express a new vision and to create a new image. Newness did not come without cost, without a willingness to let go of congregational patterns which had grown and developed over 101 years of life in the Spring Lake community. The name change signaled a willingness to die to what had been, trusting the God of resurrection to create something new.

A theological vision, hammered out of the dialogue with Scripture and concrete human experience, is at the center of our life. For me, human experience has driven me to theological reflection, and theological investigation has freed me to proclaim good news with evangelical passion and intellectual integrity.

The vision that shapes us could not have evolved had I not come to a new understanding of Scripture, as indicated above. I believe Scripture is normative, God's Spirit moving the human author to witness to the "happening" of God's revelation. Scripture arises out of the history of Israel and Jesus, the locus God in freedom chose to unveil God's eternal purpose for Creation, the "place" in which God's grace has come to clear demonstration.

But, the story goes on. Just as the biblical witness is the interpretation and reinterpretation in light of ongoing historical experience of living under the reign of God, so the church keeps alive the story of Israel and Jesus Christ, *but must constantly re-frame the given story, casting it in new perspective, as it moves through history's unfolding landscape*. Any expression of Christian faith must be shaped through dialogue with that witness. The Bible is the inspired preaching of the community of faith, but preaching in the power of the Spirit is today, as well, Word of God. God's revelation in Israel and Jesus is listened to in the context of concrete human experience. Revelation "happens" as Barth insisted, and it still happens.

Traditionally, the Scriptures have been used in an authoritarian manner, laying the "then" over "now" in a prescriptive way. One preaches "correct beliefs" and is locked into specific practices of life and worship. We are seeking rather to experience God in concrete human experience *illuminated* by Scripture so that our faith and our life connect.

In preaching and teaching I have cultivated openness, affirmed diversity, and encouraged respect for a broad spectrum of opinion. A closed belief system disallows the possibility of a full human experience, which is always developing, to remain connected to one's authentic spiritual perceptions—which cannot help but receive the impact of present experience. If an external rule holds absolute authority, then I cannot honestly evaluate my own concrete human experience. I have the answer before I can formulate the question. Where such biblicism is the rule, the gulf between "correct belief" and actual experience widens. Subscription to a doctrinal system that is absolutized forces compartmentalization of religious belief from everyday experience of the world and life.

If there is a center to the theological understanding that shapes our total existence as a people, it is the theology of grace. Out of the barrenness of Sarah's womb (Gen. 11:30) God began a movement with particular focus in order to realize the universal purpose expressed in creation. A theology of creation embraces the covenant of grace initiated with Abraham, through whom God would bring grace to all nations. God's electing love found expression in the covenant community, not to the exclusion of the many, but on behalf of the many.

If I would point to one theological insight that has transformed my preaching and released me to embrace all who come and, consequently, has formed the mind and heart of this community, it is the universal extent of God's grace. I will not argue universalism; I think when we come to "isms" we generally know too much; we become ideological. But that God's grace is of far greater extent than it has been traditionally understood is a deep conviction and it has changed my ministry.

The limits of grace can be debated. Christians differ. But that to which I witness regarding my own experience of ministry and the tone quality of the congregation cannot be denied. It is rooted in a theology of grace that takes historical shape in Israel and the church and embraces creation.

A profound sense of God's grace brings one a very great freedom, freedom from fear and defensiveness, freedom from the anxiety of what the future holds for human development, scientific discovery, or philosophical formulation. Grace brings freedom and creates openness. There are no questions we dare not ask, no perspectives we fear to bring to expression.

The people have joined me in a pilgrimage of faith. There is no "Christ Community line." They trust me and give me freedom to probe and test, and I give them freedom to agree or disagree. I have continued to do serious theological study and I offer classes in theology. For example, we have studied Berkhof's *Christian Faith*, Küng's *On Being a Christian, Does God Exist?*, and *A Theology for the Third Millennium*, along with David Tracy, Charles Davis, Edward Schillebeeckx, and many others. I always let the congregation know where I am investigating, what questions are pressing to me, and in which direction I am moving.

We do theology together—indirectly. Out of concrete human experience, the stuff of our present experience of life in family, community, and world, we think theologically. The biblical story illumines experience, and experience elicits new light from the Scriptures. Our theology is not a static given; it is in process, an ongoing adventure of seeing our life in God's light, a joyful and serious endeavor of discovering what it means to live before the face of God.

By seeking to define and clarify the questions that move our human existence, rather than claiming to have answers, we give space for a broad spectrum of

persons to join the journey. The openness of the community creates freedom to be open to any contemporary quest for meaning, for transcendence. Those who are empty and rootless are not impressed if handed a ready-made answer before their question is sensitively heard.

The recent widespread interest in the work in mythology by Joseph Campbell, popularized by the interview with Bill Moyers and published under the title *The Power of Myth*, is just one example of the spiritual quest of multitudes who have given up on the institutional church as a place where their quest might be satisfied. What responsibility do we bear for their despair of finding in the church some clue to spiritual reality, to the experience of God? Secure in the grace of God, our faith is not fragile. When I encounter the defensiveness and fear so common in our churches today, I am amazed at the lack of confidence in the truth of biblical faith as though it need be protected from the challenge of new insights and angles of vision.

God's grace—before it, I am in awe, humbled, full of gratitude. I rest in it and feel a freedom to let God be God, to entrust my flawed self and fallible understanding to God's mercy. I don't know why some experience anguish in ministry and I have known such joy. I know all is Grace; therefore boasting is excluded, but so is despair.

There is enough pain in the church to go around, and simplistic solutions and pious clichés only deepen the woundedness. Our story is simply a story of trust, resting in the good and gracious God, letting go of yesterday's formulations if they no longer connect with today's experience; letting go of church structures that have outlived the purpose for which they were created.

Maybe the truth is that the institutional church has to die. Maybe our pain stems from our desperate attempts to rescue structures which are warring against the larger purposes of the Sovereign One. Maybe our techniques and promotional schemes, our growth strategies and evangelism campaigns are human control measures borrowed from the marketing strategy of a consumer society. We may have to let the church die, but God is not dead.

**Reference:**

Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I.1-2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. First published 1957; T & T Clark Ltd., 1961.