

October 2006    Volume 33    Number 5

From Russia,  
In Hope

**CURRENTS**  
in Theology and Mission

# Currents

## in Theology and Mission

Published by  
**Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago**  
in cooperation with  
**Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary**  
**Wartburg Theological Seminary**

Editor: **Ralph W. Klein**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*  
*rklein@lstc.edu*

Associate Editor: **Norma Cook Everist**

*Wartburg Theological Seminary*  
*ncookeverist@wartburgseminary.edu*

Assistant Editor: **Peggy Blomenberg**

*pbe@lstc.edu*

Editor of Preaching Helps: **Craig A. Satterlee**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*  
*csatterl@lstc.edu*

Editors of Book Reviews:

**Edgar Krentz**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0752)*  
*ekrentz@lstc.edu*

**Connie Kleingartner**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0747)*  
*ckleinga@lstc.edu*

**Craig L. Nessian**

*Wartburg Theological Seminary (563/589-0207)*  
*cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu*

Circulation office: 773/256-0751

*currents@lstc.edu*

Editorial Board: **Pamela J. S. Challis, Connie Kleingartner, Randall R. Lee, Richard L. Ramirez, Susan Rippert, Barbara Rossing, Jensen Seyenkulo, Susan Swanson, Vicki Watkins, Fritz Wehrenberg, Vitor Westhelle.**

CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: \$18.00 in the U.S.A., \$23.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: \$35.00 in the U.S.A., \$45.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: \$51.00 in the U.S.A., \$65.00 elsewhere. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database, Elenchus, IZBW, NTA, OTA, Religion Index I* (formerly *IRPL*), *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung*.

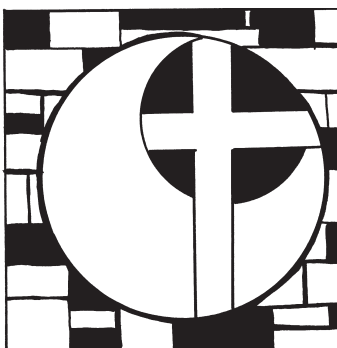
MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

# Contents

---

- From Russia, in Hope** 362  
Ralph W. Klein
- The Elusive Presence: Jeremiah 20:4–11** 366  
Fredrick C. Holmgren
- He Sent Them Out to Heal! Reflections  
on the Healing Ministry of the Church** 372  
Christoffer H. Grundmann
- Contextualization for Ministry and the  
Lutheran Heritage** 379  
Albert Pero, Jr.
- China Today** 388  
John Gugel
- Itinerating Wives and Mary Magdalene** 394  
William E. Phipps
- Dale Martin’s “*Arsenokoités* and  
*Malakos*” Tried and Found Wanting** 397  
Gary R. Jepsen
- Adam and Eve/Adam and Steve?  
A Challenge to the Hermeneutical  
“Complementarity” Argument** 406  
Gwen Sayler
- Book Reviews** 415

Drawings by Mark Kloess



---

## Preaching Helps 419

### Holiday Dos and Don'ts

Craig A. Satterlee

### First Sunday in Advent—Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Series C

Contributor: Luke L. Bouman

## From Russia, in Hope

---

Marilyn and I spent our vacation in St. Petersburg and Moscow this summer. Our two weeks there gave us no expertise whatsoever on so vast a country—the distance from one end of Russia to the other is greater than the distance between Moscow and Chicago. The more we learned, the less we understood. The Russian Orthodox Church is back in favor, or at least it has gained enough financial backing to refurbish and even rebuild churches destroyed or secularized by Stalin. Orthodox spirituality celebrates mystery while our mostly right-brained Christianity features moments like preaching, largely unknown there. Moscow, they say, is the most expensive city in the world, but the salaries of people like school teachers and doctors in today's Russia pale in comparison with salaries here. Go figure. Some people we met longed for the good old days of the Soviet system; others thrived on the nascent capitalism or, among the young, never knew the old system first hand at all.

The articles in this issue expose the disagreements among our writers and probably among our subscribers as well. Our unity is surely and solely and finally baptismal; our realities, even in the Christian or even Lutheran tradition, proclaim our diversity. How frankly can we speak to God? How central is healing to the Christian tradition? What makes up the center of Lutheranism? How can we Western Christians learn from Chinese Christians? And when it comes to the sexuality of Jesus or the current debates about homosexuality in the church and society, don't expect to read one point of view, let alone imagine that the editorial board, let alone the editor, agrees with everything here printed. We aim to print responsible arguments, not a party line.

**Fredrick C. Holmgren** notes that as Jeremiah spoke his warning message to the people, he felt abandoned by the very one who had called him. Jeremiah longed for the comforting presence of Immanuel, but in his time of desperate need God appears nowhere to be found. Throughout Jeremiah's ministry he was pressured by questions about God's inaction that allowed his enemies to have the upper hand. Jeremiah is a model for an honest relationship with God. Jeremiah's "Confessions" and other laments in the Old Testament connected with the Israelite community, as they do with communities facing hard lives today. When the road is rough, it is not an act of unfaith to release our thoughts to God in lament. Both Jeremiah and the psalmists matched their laments with frequent outbursts of praise. Several texts in the New Testament appear to point to Jesus' own struggle in accepting his path of suffering. While

confession of guilt is a part of some laments, it is usually not the case. The heightened emphasis on sin in the New Testament may explain the rarity of lament in this testament. Lament is also relatively infrequent in Christian worship, resulting in passive behavior that accepts whatever comes one's way. Lament, however, offers the Christian congregation opportunity to bring real life and faith together.

**Christoffer H. Grundmann** calls the church back to the ministry of healing. Both Jesus and the disciples specialized in healing, but the topic has received only slight attention in academic theology. In recent years, however, healing has become one of the most notable characteristics of many churches, especially in the southern hemisphere. How do these healing experiences relate to salvation? In the ministry of Jesus healing became a legitimate corporeal aspect of salvation as Jesus cured every disease and sickness. Jesus lived out the compassionate care for humanity which is credited to God throughout the Old Testament. The healings of Jesus brought life in all its abundance. The disciples in turn healed in the name of Jesus, thus by an authority not their own. The history of the church is also one of genuine compassion and care, entailing the establishment of healing institutions and of programs devoted to care. The proclamation of the gospel attempts to bring people back into the presence of the living God as it was in the very beginning. While seeking to bring about healing is part of the mission of the church, very often such healing does not take place in spite of all our efforts. Healing is always just a provisional mending, preventing untimely death, not death as such.

**Albert Pero, Jr.** has been a pioneer in articulating what it means to be Black within Lutheranism. The theological pluralism made clear in the works of African and African American Lutheran theologians is echoed today by similar voices among Asian, Latin American, and feminist Lutherans. The "center" of Lutheranism is constituted by the contributions of the whole of the Lutheran circle to the center. Each of the Lutheran cultures must cultivate its own particularity with energy and a sense of the larger whole. The proclamation of the gospel is always directed not toward humankind in general but toward humankind wrapped in all of its cultural diversity. We must be careful not to see our own Christian cultural tradition as *the* Christian tradition. The universal thrust of the gospel prevents theology from becoming only indigenous, and the indigenous character of the gospel prevents theology from becoming merely theoretical or transcultural. Spirituality is that constant tension of trying to understand what it is that God is calling us to be and to do. The breath of God can be a mighty powerful thing, upsetting us in ways we never expected. A minister in a multicultural context, who has experienced the ministry of the Holy Spirit, has a head start on following Jesus.

**John Gugel** reports on a recent visit he made to China. While respectful of the missionaries' witness to the gospel, he notes that many Chinese remember the missionaries' collaboration with the oppressive Western infrastructure. Bitterness about experience with the Japanese during World War II continues among Chinese to this day. Some of the worst wounds China has suffered were the result of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite persecution, the church survived and even thrived in this period. Some estimate that the church grew fourteen times as numerous from the beginning of the Peoples Republic to the end of the Cultural Revolution. We can learn from the Chinese Christians how to remain faithful in the face of hostility and the threat of death. The Chinese have also transcended denominationalism, discovering that under persecution they could no longer enjoy the luxury of separation. In this too they may be an example to the West. The Amity Foundation, in collaboration with the United Bible Society, has printed 35 million Bibles, but it has also focused on helping the millions of poor people in China.

**William E. Phipps** claims that *The Da Vinci Code* is based in part on his own book, published in 1970, in which he argued that Jesus was married, possibly to Mary Magdalene. He argues that early church leaders were as a rule married and that arguments about Jesus' marital state are based largely on arguments of silence. The women who went from village to village with Jesus and the disciples had, in his view, become married. The heavy impact of Jerome and Augustine on Christian teaching has made it difficult to understand the marital mores of people like Jesus and Mary Magdalene, who were part of the Jewish culture.

**Gary R. Jepsen** continues our series of articles on homosexuality, arguing for the traditional understanding of 1 Cor 6:9–10. His essay is an extensive review of an article by Dale Martin that can be found on the Internet and that he would classify as the revisionist position. He argues that the etymology of the word *arsenokoités* is significant for its meaning in the New Testament but that the traditional understanding is also supported by the context in which it is used. While he concedes that the word might have been used in texts later than Paul to designate homosexual rape or sex by economic exploitation, it sometimes may also have been used to refer to homosexuality in general. In addition, he argues that the usage of the term in the Septuagint of Leviticus would have highly influenced how Paul used this term. He also argues that Martin is wrong in construing the term *malakos* as a full-scale attack on the feminine and not as referring to a penetrated male in a homosexual act. Finally, he claims that Martin has given up the guiding principle from the Reformation that Scripture is the norm for the faith and life of the church.

Quite another position is maintained by **Gwen Sayler**, who challenges the “complementarity argument” on homosexuality because it imposes on Genesis 1–2 questions foreign to the issues the texts are addressing and because it assumes that the anthropological model of two sexes differentiated on biological grounds has been constant from ancient times to the present. Her critique is directed at Robert Gagnon, who has championed the complementarity argument. In the Yahwist’s account, however, covenantal lines of procreation, not complementarity of the sexes, constitute the subject of the Yahwist’s use of bone/flesh imagery. In the Yahwist document, the significance of the creation of man and woman is explored in terms of perpetuation of covenant lineage rather than of proper norms for sexual relationships. The notion of complementary sexes was alien to the worldview of ancient times. Furthermore, the conceptualization of the human body in any era reflects the worldview of that time rather than an essence unchanged throughout time. Claus Westermann concludes that, far from providing a general understanding of sexuality, the narrative of Genesis 1 is shaped to challenge readers to face how incomprehensible and indescribable is the subject of the author’s story. The Genesis story presupposes the dominance of the partner with the more perfect body (male) and the subordination of the less perfect body (female). The human’s status and role among the other creatures—to rule over the rest of creation—is captured through its identification as “image of God.” While Gagnon concludes that same-sex sexual relationships cannot express the image of God, he fails to address the implications of his logic for unmarried heterosexuals and for heterosexual couples who are childless. The Genesis 1–2 creation accounts simply do not address the question of whether God’s creation of the first Adam and Eve necessitates divine and human censure of today’s Adam and Steve.

I never dreamed that the Soviet Union or Apartheid would pass from the scene peaceably or even pass from the scene at all. But pass they did. We often limit our horizons to the cultures or the traditions or the opinions or the options in which we were born or raised, thereby shutting our eyes to the gifts that lie all around us, thanks to the One who makes all things new. Not every opinion is tenable, not every option is to be preferred, not every hope is realizable. But if angry laments demonstrate how deeply we trust God, being free to act for change in our contexts shows how much God trusts us.

Or at least that’s what I think today.

*Ralph W. Klein, Editor*

# The Elusive Presence:<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 20:4–11

---

Fredrick C. Holmgren

*Research Professor of Old Testament  
North Park Theological Seminary  
Fholmgren@northpark.edu*

## Experiencing presence and absence

Jeremiah's name is forever associated with laments and complaints. In the Hebrew-Jewish tradition, however, he does not stand alone. Approximately one-half of the book of Psalms, titled "Praises" in the Hebrew Bible, contain laments! They are cries for justice and deliverance to a seemingly absent God from people who, like Jeremiah, are enduring great pain. These laments create a dissonance with a major theme in the Old Testament, that of Immanuel, the God who is with us and for us—the God who cares (e.g., Exod 3:12; Josh 1:5; Isa 7:14 and 41:10). The psalmists rejoice and give thanks to this Divine Partner whose mighty acts of righteousness and mercy have meant life to Israel. It is on such a God that Jeremiah pins his hopes (Jer 1: 8) when he is called to prophesy. God promised to deliver him from his opponents, and these words were a "joy and the delight" to him (Jer 15:16; cf. Ezek 3:3).

However, this promise of support and protection was as deceptive as a mirage—it was as "a deceitful brook, like waters that fail" (15:18; cf. 20:7–8). As Jeremiah begins to speak the warning message that God gave him, he feels abandoned, forsaken by the very one who called him. His message of "violence and destruction" (vv.



7–8) is not taken seriously. People laugh at him and mock his warning that soon the land will endure unimaginable cruelties brought on by a conquering enemy. There will be, he announces, "terror . . . on every side" (Jer 6:22–25). His opponents, however, turn a deaf ear to his threatening proclamation and make fun of his warning call. Some scholars think that his enemies may have used the phrase as a title for him, something like "Mr. Terror Man" (Jer 20:10). His enemies, however, do not limit themselves to mocking words; they persecute him and attempt to kill him (Jer 11:18–21). His friends also have proven untrue. They have not only left him; they watch and hope for his downfall (20:10). Stand-

---

1. Title taken from the influential volume by Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

ing alone and exposed to the attacks of his persecutors, Jeremiah begs God not to become a “terror” to him because “you are my [only] refuge” (Jer 17:17). He wants to pull away from his commitment to speak this message, but he feels pressure from within to continue (Jer 20:7). He is at the end of his strength! Finally, in angry and despairing words that echo Job’s own longing for the peace and rest of non-birth, Jeremiah curses the day when he was born, the day that would be the beginning of sorrow and suffering (20:14–18; cf. Job 3:1–26). The prophet, who is calling on people to trust in God, now finds his own confidence in God wavering on the edge of rejection.

Jeremiah longs for the comforting presence of Immanuel, but now, when he is in desperate need, God appears nowhere to be found. In the temple, however, people praise God’s interventions in the past and saving actions of the present (see, e.g., Pss 34; 103; 135; 136). Jeremiah repeats such praise also (17:14, 17; 20:13), but in the midst of his suffering it no doubt lacks the sure conviction of the early days when it was “a joy and delight” to accept God’s call (15:16). It is praise coming from one hanging by a thread but still trusting that what he is experiencing has not escaped God’s eyes. Fully aware of the miracle of the Exodus, Jeremiah no doubt is hoping that God would “notice” his suffering, hear his cries, and deliver him as he once heard and delivered the Israelites under Moses (Exod 2:24–25; 3:7–9).

The text that we are examining in this article is but one of seven or eight texts in which Jeremiah struggles with his relationship to God—swinging back and forth between confidence and doubt, hope and despair (e.g., 17:14–18). We should not therefore think of the prophet as one whose usual faith and optimism was marred by a one-time fall into questioning and doubt.

No, it appears that throughout Jeremiah’s ministry he was pressured by questions of God’s inaction that allowed his enemies to have the upper hand. In the end, however, even if he had questions and serious complaints about what was happening to him, he proved faithful to his call.

Jeremiah appeals to us because he does not pretend to be the model for a “strong” faith that is ever trusting, optimistic, and confident. He is a model, however, for an honest relationship with God. He trusts his Divine Partner so fully that together with words of praise he is able to share his doubt and disappointment. It is apparent that he believed that God would accept him as he truly was, whether in praise or lament. Although Jeremiah was one of the great prophets of Israel, in truth he was only a human being who sought to follow God’s will. He makes us aware that the God-human relationship is not as simple and clear-cut as some would lead us to believe.

### **Jeremiah and other lament texts**

The prophet is not alone in his struggle to maintain confidence in God when confronted with realities that appear to deny any trace of a caring divine face. Similar cries are raised in the books of Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and Habakkuk. The mood of lament also lies heavy on the heart of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. These books testify that the life of faith is not for the fainthearted or for those who want only to live in the sunshine of such a psalm as Psalm 34, which proclaims: “When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.”

The laments found in the above biblical books struck a note of needed reality in Israel’s life and worship. They, together with other texts that celebrate God’s saving actions, were widely read and finally pre-

served as Holy Scripture for the faith community. These lament texts “connected” with the ancient Israelite-Jewish community, and they find a receptive hearing among people today. When life gets hard, people of faith read with appreciation and relief these texts whose feet-on-the-ground realism releases them to speak honestly to God. They feel reassured that before their Divine Partner they do not have to be “theologically correct” but can in prayer to God be who they really are in thought. The inclusion of laments in Scripture tells us that the life of faith is not always a close walk with God along a smooth untroubled path. Further, laments assure us that when the road is rough it is not an act of unfaith to release our inner thoughts in lament—not to someone *about* God, but *to* God. Honest response to God is to acknowledge what we are thinking and feeling, whether it be praise or lament.

Should it be lament in which we speak of our difficulties, it does not mean that we are pulling away from God in unbelief. Rather, we are moving toward God. We can be confident that we are being heard and understood. God’s affirming words to Job, even though Job admits that he went over the top in some of his complaints (42:3), make this clear to us. God judges the theological correctness of the friends and, speaking to Eliphaz, declares: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). God, according to the author of Job, respects the honest response of Job more than the pious-sounding words of the friends that load guilt on the one in pain. The final cap on the relationship of Job and his friends to God is God’s decision to ask Job to pray for the friends!

For many years while teaching seminary courses on the Old Testament and lay

study courses in churches, I found that students and laypersons often resonated with the laments of Jeremiah, Job, and the psalms as well as the reflective character of the book of Ecclesiastes. The reason that these texts attract such favorable attention is that they speak freely of a side of reality that many of us have thought about but only seldom have allowed to be given free voice. Christians often feel uncomfortable in expressing despair and anger to God regarding suffering that has come their way. There is an even greater reluctance to express our disappointment and doubt of God’s own action in our lives. Such behavior is viewed as faithless and rebellious against God. However, neither Jeremiah, the psalmist, nor Job departed from faith and loyalty to God. Their continued loyalty to the covenant with God explains the decision of the later believing community to include these texts in what became Scripture.

### Lament and praise

It is important to remember that Jeremiah’s life was not only about lament. Both he and the psalmists were able to raise their voices in praise to God even though suffering terrible hurt within. Pushed to the edge of faith by suffering, the prophet still remembers God’s just and merciful acts in Israel’s history and is moved, even if briefly, to praise and express confidence in God (20:11–13).

It may seem strange that one who complains with such strength against God could also utter words of praise. That, however, is not surprising, because Jeremiah and the psalmists speak to God about all of their thoughts and experiences and bring forth both praise and lament. A trusting relationship to God is revealed in lament as well as in praise because, as mentioned above, in lament one does not speak *about* God but rather *to* him. Unlike speaking *about* God,

which does not involve any kind of a relationship between the lamenter and God, speaking *to* God assumes a previous and even an intimate relationship. Even in times of deep hurt and discouragement Jeremiah did not pull away from his Partner. Coming out of a priestly family, he grew up in the worship tradition of the temple and was familiar with both the praise and lament of believers. Even when experiencing sharp disappointment with God—to the point of cursing one’s day of birth—there was always hope and expectation that the Divine Partner would take notice of what was happening to him. Only when there is the conviction that God cares about what is taking place does it make sense to complain.

In the New Testament there is little that compares to the bold questioning and challenging of God found in Jeremiah, the Psalms, and Job. The only passages that approach texts found in these Old Testament books are those associated with Jesus. Such a discovery is quite unexpected because, given our belief in the divine Sonship of Jesus, it is difficult to imagine that he would take up a lament to his Father.

But several texts in the New Testament appear to point to Jesus’ own questioning struggle in accepting his path of suffering (cf. Paul’s plea in 2 Cor 12:7–8). For example, Jesus pleads in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering be removed from him (Mark 14:36). This prayer, says the author of Hebrews, was offered up “with loud cries and tears.” Further, Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:36) takes up the desperate cry of abandonment from a sufferer out of the past. Some interpreters believe that this cry underscores the Christian confession of the early creeds that Jesus is as truly human as he is divine. In his passion, it is believed, we

experience the mystery of the incarnation, namely, the divine-human Jesus suffering desolation. Others, however, hold that this plea taken from the first line of Psalm 22 is an ancient way of referring to the whole psalm that ends on a note of praise. Such an interpretation underscores the confidence that Jesus has in God. It also serves to underplay Jesus’ experience of abandonment, which is thought to focus too much on Jesus’ humanity. But even though Psalm 22 ends on a note of praise and confidence, it should not be overlooked that in about one-half of the verses the psalmist despairs of his fate and pleads for help.

Praise and lament are not contradictory expressions. In Jeremiah, as in many lament psalms, both lament and praise are present. In fact, there is only one lament in the Psalms (Psalm 88) that does not include within it praise. To affirm, therefore, that Jesus, in citing this psalm, expressed confidence in God does not exclude the possibility that he was also suffering the desolation of the psalmist.

### **Lament and confession of sin**

Further, regarding lament in the Old Testament, it may be observed that while confession of guilt is a part of some laments, such is usually not the case. This lack of confession of guilt in the lament psalms and the laments of Jeremiah as well as the protestations of innocence (e.g., Jer 15:15–18; Pss 17, 26) are not so shocking if we remember that these laments have to do with some specific occurrence (e.g., being oppressed unjustly). In such cases, those lamenting are affirming that in this specific matter they are not guilty of wrongdoing. However, they are not claiming to be without sin in other aspects of their life. This is somewhat similar to a “not guilty” finding in our court system concerning a particular event. Saying that one is not guilty does not imply

that one is completely innocent of fault in the living out of one's life.

A case that borders on our discussion occurs with Paul according to the book of Timothy. Paul calls himself the "foremost" of sinners (1 Tim 1:15), but he nevertheless defends his integrity, as do Jeremiah and the psalmists, when he says "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (1 Tim 4:7). Even though a part of sinful humanity, Paul was a person of noble character in his life for Christ. Confessing his sinfulness was not the same as declaring that he was absolutely devoid of virtue. It is not necessary to confess one's sinfulness every time one asserts some good about oneself. Even if Jeremiah and the psalmists view themselves to be among the sinful, it should not be surprising that they could cry out in lament in some specific case of suffering without accompanying that cry by a confession of sin.

Although in the Old Testament there is a strong declaration of deep sinfulness (e.g., Isa 6:5; Pss 32, 51), one finds in the New Testament a much stronger emphasis on the sinfulness of humankind (e.g., Rom 3:9–23). Claus Westermann believes that this increased emphasis on sin and guilt explains why the mood of lament is relatively rare in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> He explains that the Christian tradition, under the strong influence of Pauline theology, laid heavy emphasis on sin and guilt. Everyone, according to Paul, is guilty of sin, deserving of judgment, and in need of forgiveness. Between suffering in this world and the guilt of sin, the latter is by far the more important. One needs to confess one's sin, receive forgiveness, and be restored to God's family. Once one has experienced the forgiveness of sin and salvation through Christ—with the assurance of a glorious life after death by the resurrec-

tion of Jesus—there is little reason to lament over the pain and suffering that one must endure in this world. The "little while" that we must endure suffering here on earth is as nothing compared to the eternal glory that is to come (2 Cor 4:17; Col 1:5, 12; 1 Pet 5:9–10).

### **Lament and Christian worship**

If in the New Testament there is a relative absence of the lament tradition, we should not be surprised at the general lack of lament in Christian worship. True, as noted above, we have the example of the lament cry of Jesus. The Christian reader, however, tends to concentrate less on the lament aspect of Jesus' prayer than on his commitment to do the will of God (Mark 14:36; see also Heb 5:7–8 and Phil 2:8). His obedience, which is seen as an example for those following him, has strongly influenced Christian piety. For many Christians, this obedience translates into a submissive, passive behavior in which one accepts what comes one's way as caused or for some reason is allowed by God. To question or to complain to God, as Jeremiah does, seems to many to reflect a loss of faith. But as the psalmist says, God knows what is in the heart (44:21), and we are urged to "pour out" our heart before him (62:8). God is one who knows us and accepts us as we are, so it is not necessary to hold back from our Divine Partner our true feelings of disappointment, doubt, and anger. The God we know from the Scriptures would not be surprised to hear such laments. To whom else can we reveal our true feelings and thoughts if we do not do so in prayer to God?

One cannot survive, however, with an

2. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 273–75.

exclusively lament view of the world. The life of faith is one in which both praise and lament have a place. Both are essential aspects of true worship. Lament keeps praise in contact with reality, and praise from the one who laments is the sign that, though suffering great hurt, this one has not given up confidence in God.

### Revival of lament in the church

In the Black church, unlike some other major church communities, the lament tradition (e.g., in its spirituals) has for a long time been a significant part of church life. Within the last twenty years, lament has received increasing attention in other Christian circles. Walter Brueggemann has been a prominent force in underscoring its importance for the whole Christian church.<sup>3</sup> He declares that Christian worship has focused too heavily on the hymn of praise—almost to the exclusion of the lament. The church, he believes, must be a place where both hymns of praise and laments are at home. For Brueggemann, being a person of faith does not mean denying the natural responses of complaint and impatience as well as the questioning that comes when misfortune arrives. These thoughts, which we know are present, are not to be pressed down and hidden within; rather they are to be presented to God. Lament is an expression that offers the Christian congregation opportunity to bring real life and faith together. It not only promotes healing for those within the congregation, it also has the capacity to open Christian ears to the human cry outside the walls of the church.

Martin E. Marty's reflections on the presence and absence of God have provided momentum for a revival of lament within the Christian community.<sup>4</sup> Marty uses the seasonal designations, summer and winter, to speak about praise and la-

ment. Many within the Christian tradition, he observes, take a summery view of life. No matter what happens, they hold to an attitude of praise and thankfulness. These people, indicates Marty, lack full reflection on the hard realities that large numbers of people face day by day. A "theological correctness" blinds the eyes and hardens the heart to those attempting to weather the blistering winds of winter. Given the laments of Jeremiah, the psalmists, and pleadings of Jesus, it is remarkable that still today there are those in the church who wish to make all of life into one season: summer. To be sure, summertime is a grand season of the year, and to live life-long without experiencing its bright warmth would be an unbearable sadness. Most people, however, find themselves often assaulted by winter and its hardships, and summertime songs do not bring comfort. In fact, Marty observes, the pain of those suffering the coldness of winter is not lessened but is actually increased by those displaying the unwavering piety of a summery disposition. Hurt is added to hurt! Marty urges Christian congregations to become acquainted with the lament psalms and underscores the truth that these texts come from those "who have horizons where the summer sun does little warming, *but who also do not lose trust.*"<sup>5</sup>

The laments of Jeremiah, the psalmists, and others who continue to hold fast to God are a reminder that the God who loves us does not desert when summer fades but, when the difficult days arrive, keeps a ready ear open to our cries.

3. See his article "The Friday Voice of Faith," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 12–21.

4. Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflection for the Winter of the Heart* (Harper and Row, 1983), 40.

5. Marty, *A Cry of Absence*, 40.

# He Sent Them Out to Heal!

## Reflections on the Healing Ministry of the Church

---

Christoffer H. Grundmann

*Valparaiso, Indiana*

*Christoffer.Grundmann@valpo.edu*

Healing is nothing alien to biblical tradition. Healing has been present among the people of God from earliest times (Exod 15:26) and was linked to faith in the living God (Num 12:10–16; 21:4–9; Isa 38:1–6; Sir 38:9–15). Particularly in the New Testament, healing is accorded a pointed significance. Matthew unambiguously states: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom . . . curing every disease and every sickness” (Matt 9:35).

In contrast to other religious traditions, healing is nothing marginal within Christianity. This is due to the imprint of not only the ministry of Jesus but also that of his disciples. Jesus sent them out to do as he did, namely, “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal,” giving them “power and authority over all demons . . . to cure diseases” (Lk 9:1–2; 10:9). The risen Christ reconfirmed this mandate: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation . . .” adding that by using his name “they will cast out demons” and “will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:15–18). The book of Acts shows that the apostles did, in fact, pay heed to this command—Peter and Paul being the most prominent, though not

the only, examples.<sup>1</sup> And when writing to the Corinthians Paul acknowledged that healings are graciously granted gifts (*charismata*) of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9–10).<sup>2</sup>

Healing was a common phenomenon in the early church<sup>3</sup> as it always has been for popular religion.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, though, the topic has received only slight attention within established academic theology.<sup>5</sup> But the situation is changing, because healing has staged an impressive comeback within Christianity, first at the beginning of the twentieth century as a spinoff of the revivalist/Holiness movements in North America and Europe,<sup>6</sup> eventually triggering in-depth studies by such bodies as the Anglican Church in Great Britain and the Lutheran Church in America.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, healing has become one of the notable characteristics of many churches, especially in the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Some have experienced prayer-healing movements and met with remarkable activities of charismatic healers, while others have straightforwardly become healing churches, like the Zionist churches in southern Africa. But all of these churches still have a hard time gaining sympathy, much less acceptance, for their particular kind of witness and for their way of doing theology

within the ecumenical fellowship. This is especially true on the part of the historic churches in the Northwestern parts of the world with their sophisticated theological education, their focus on their abundant diaconal programs, and their commitment to *caritas* (charitable love).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the reason why healing matters is twofold. The first is its basis in the broad biblical and historical tradition of Chris-

tianity. The second is the actual presence of healing as a phenomenon within the ecumenical community of churches today. This makes healing a prime topic for contemporary academic theology in general and for missiology in particular. Can conventional Christianity honestly face the innocent, very simple and yet surprisingly disarming question “How come you know Jesus and you no heal nobody?”—a challenge once put to

1. Peter not only healed a lame man at the entrance to the temple (Acts 3:1–8) and the paralyzed Aeneas at Lydda (Acts 9:32–35) but also raised the dead Tabitha at Joppa (Acts 9:36–41). Ananias healed Paul from his blindness at Damascus (Acts 9:17–19), and Paul healed a man unable to walk (Acts 14:8–11) and the sick father of Publius on the island of Malta (Acts 28:8–9). And, like Peter, Paul also raised someone from death (Acts 20:9–12). There are several other accounts of the apostles’ activities in Acts (see 5:15–16; 8:6–7; 19:11–12; 28:9). Other references to “wonders and signs” are found in Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; and not to be forgotten is Paul’s famous reference to healing as a charismatic gift in 1 Cor 12:8–10.

2. For a comprehensive account of the biblical material see Klaus Seybold and Ulrich B. Müller, *Sickness and Healing*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

3. See A. v. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), esp. 101–46.

4. Mention need only be made of the Cosmas and Damian cult, which is alive predominantly in southern Europe (see E. Giannarelli and A. Dillon Bussi, *Cosma e Damiano—dall’ Oriente a Firenze* (Firenze: Edizioni della Meridiana, 2002), and of the shrine at Lourdes (see Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions—Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005).

5. For a survey of recent literature on the topic of healing (mainly in German) see Christoffer H. Grundmann, “Heilung als Thema der Theologie” (Healing as a Topic for Theology), *ThLZ* 130:3 (2005), 231–46.

6. See David E. Harrell, *All Things Are Possible—The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976); and *The Church and Healing*, Studies in Church History 19, ed. W. J. Sheils (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

7. See *A Time to Heal—A Contribution towards the Ministry of Healing*, A Report for the House of Bishops (London: Church Publishing House, 2000); Ralph E. Peterson, *A Study of the Healing Church and Its Ministry: The Health Care Apostolate* (New York: Lutheran Church in America, Division for Mission in North America, 1982); B. Häring, *The Healing Ministry of the Church in the Coming Decades* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 1982); *Our Ministry of Healing—Health and Health Care Today* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001).

8. See, for instance, the various papers in *Report of the Umpumulo Consultation on the Healing Ministry of the Church, Lutheran Theological College, Mapumulo, Natal, South Africa, 19–27 Sept. 1967* (Umpumulo, 1967). Much more understanding is Marthinus L. Daneel, *Zionism and Faith Healing in Rhodesia—Aspects of African Independent Churches* (Mouton: The Hague, 1970); Marthinus L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches*, 3 vols. (Mouton: The Hague, 1971–1988); Bengt Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976); Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); and *The Church and Healing—Echos from Africa*, ed. B. E. Larty et al. (Frankfurt: Lang, 1994).

a gathering of Roman Catholic priests in the United States? “The Sioux Indian Christian received no answer from his audience,” reports one of the attendees, who then goes on to ponder: “We may smile tolerantly at what we regard as his simplistic reading of the biblical narratives. Yet his question leaves an uneasy feeling that we might be missing something. It cannot be easily brushed aside. Should we be doing more to fulfill Jesus Christ’s commission to his disciples, ‘Go preach . . . go heal’?”<sup>9</sup> Because of that question, at least one person—the writer concerned—did become one of the most articulate advocates of the reconsideration of the healing ministry within Roman Catholic circles and beyond.

Still, healing poses an enormous challenge to conventional theology (which may well explain the reluctance of church authorities and theologians to address it), a challenge rooted in the fact that healing is not a Christian prerogative and is not at anyone’s disposal. It is a vital sign of all life. It has been present since the very beginnings of life—in the continuous mending of incomplete and broken strings during DNA reduplication in the course of cell division—as well as since the earliest beginnings of the human species. People did not just fall ill. Most of them also recovered and became strong again, whether “naturally” or by quite ordinary culturally established treatments and remedies, or even totally unexpectedly in ways beyond anyone’s comprehension, causing people to speak of it in terms of the miraculous. But the miraculous is just one end of that continuum of which regeneration and recovery are the other—which is to say that healings are not synonymous with miracles. This suggests a further complication: Healings are never unambiguous. Even when experienced within a Christian setting, they

do not bear proof of Christ’s authority or indisputably signify his power in and of themselves. Already in the New Testament we read that Jesus’ own healings were doubted (Matt 12:22ff.). The serious theological challenge healing experiences pose is how they relate to salvation.

One notices subtle differences between the various accounts of healing within the Scriptures. While the Synoptics view Jesus’ healings as efficacious signs of the presence of God and as manifestations of “the kingdom of God at hand” (Matt 12:22–32; Lk 10:9; 11:17–23), John regards them as revelatory “signs” of Jesus’ messiahship. (Jn 3:2; 5:36; 9:3; 20:31). And while the apostles were “healing in the name of [Jesus] Christ” (Mk 16:17; Lk 10:17; see also Acts 3:6), healings also were perceived as the work of the Holy Spirit by the first Christians (1 Cor 12:4). This calls for caution and suggests reflecting first upon healing in the ministry of Jesus before turning to the healing ministry of the church.

### Healing in the ministry of Jesus

The simple fact that Jesus healed clearly indicates that to him salvation had an unquestionable bodily dimension. In his ministry healing became one legitimate corporeal aspect of salvation, albeit never synonymous with salvation (see Mk 2:1–12). This is indicated by the numerous people who were healed by Jesus or drawn to Jesus on account of his healings (Matt 4:23–25; Mk 3:7; Lk 6:18–19; see also Acts 9:42) without becoming his disciples. Impressive as they were, Jesus’ healings evoked appreciation *and* fear, sometimes leading to awe, sometimes to rejection (Matt 8:34; Mk 5:17; Lk 5:37). However, in

9. Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974), 333.

Jesus' unique ministry, salvation was always accompanied by healing. No sick and diseased person left Jesus without being fully and completely restored, as this happens to be characteristic of the "kingdom of God" (see Rev 21:4; 22:2). That explains the bold generalization in the Gospel account that Jesus cured "every disease and every sickness." It is just such corporeality of salvation to which the indigenous churches of the Southern hemisphere appeal and that disembodied academic theology has to rediscover, as do all those churches that hail care for an "eternal soul" at the expense of the dissolving "temporal body" with all its "sinful desires."<sup>10</sup> Already as early as in the dawning days of neo-Platonism in the third century, with its neglect of the body, the North African church father Tertullian, in making reference to the Incarnation, had to remind his contemporaries that "the body is the pivot of salvation" (*caro cardo salutis*).<sup>11</sup>

A random sample of biblical passages quickly shows that corporeal individuals—not disembodied souls—are indeed the addressees of the Word of God (see Rom 10:14–15). First the Creator cared for Adam and Eve wholly, providing them the Garden of Eden with all the means for life (Gen 2:7ff.). And when they strayed in their longing to become their own masters, their bodily needs were not lost from view. Instead, God provided clothing for their naked bodies (Gen 3:21) and later revealed to his people guidelines for a good life in the Torah. Thus God set into motion the history of salvation culminating in the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ God continued to live out the compassionate care for humanity by feeding the hungry (Matt 9:10ff.; 14:13ff.; Mk 6:31ff.; Jn 6:1ff.), listening to those who cried (Matt 15:21; Mk 10:13ff., 46ff.), comforting those who wept (Jn 11:33), and healing the sick. Jesus really

did care for people and their corporeal well-being, thereby reinstating their God-likeness (Gen 1:26–27).

This of course did not mean that Jesus worshipped the body. Far from it. At times he showed obvious disregard for it: "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire" (Matt 18:8). What matters and makes life worth living is not a perfect body, despite what is advocated from within today's health, wellness, and bodybuilding madness, which is solely concerned with the prolongation of life, as evidenced in its favoring strong, healthy, un mutilated, young, beautiful bodies.<sup>12</sup> What really matters in life is the way in which one enables life to thrive. This is the perspective in which the true significance of Jesus' healings becomes manifest. They literally brought about life in abundance (Jn 10:10). That was his sole ministry—and at the same time, that was what made him suffer!

It is the healing on the Sabbath that leads to the accusation of blasphemy and

10. Liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and all the indigenous theologies can be seen as expressions of the desire to experience the corporeality of salvation.

11. Tertullian, *Treatise on the Resurrection* (*De resurrectione carnis liber*), text edited with intro., trans., and commentary by Ernest Evans (London: SPCK., 1960), 26.

12. Just note the many fitness studios and wellness spas and the huge amount of related literature on the market, for example the series of publications and programs offered by James Villepigue and Hugo Rivera, *The Body Sculpting Bible for Women—The Way to Physical Perfection*, rev. ed. (Long Island City, NY: Hatherleigh, 2002), and *The Body Sculpting Bible for Men—The Way to Physical Perfection*, rev. ed. (Long Island City, NY: Hatherleigh, 2002).

the stated decision to destroy Jesus (Mk 3:1–6; Matt 12:9–14). This is a powerful but often overlooked indication of the fact that engagement in this kind of life-furthering activity sometimes occurs at the expense of the body, even at the expense of one's own life; the crucifixion is the strongest case in point (Jn 15:13). Indeed, the first Christians perceived Jesus' passion in just this way, as is indicated by their explicit reference in this context to Isa 53:4: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matt 8:17; see 1 Pet 2:24). It is this awareness that safeguards all talk of healing ministry against its perversion into special pleading for vitality or for any kind of health-and-wellness ideology. Looking up to Jesus on the cross makes the life-furthering healing ministry focus on its genuine task, namely, to restore Godlikeness to all people, enabling them to become aware of it and, in turn, bring others to realize it, too, for this is the way to stay truly human.

### **The healing ministry of the church**

While Jesus healed by the authority of God incarnate, his disciples did so "in the name" of Jesus (Mk 16:17; Acts 3:6). This does not mean that they availed themselves of this name as a magic formula. It does say that their very ministry was vested with an authority not their own. It further says that they also had been mandated to bear witness to a potential that was, however, not at their disposal, something they painfully experienced when their well-intended attempts to heal failed (Matt 17:14–20; Mk 9:14–29; Lk 9:37–43). They thereby came to realize the difference between their ministry and that of their Lord and Master, which theology later described as "eschatological."

However, the early church also experienced the "gifts of healing" as present in its

life and ascribed these to the workings of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9–10). But the church, while acknowledging the Lordship of Christ, is not a straightforward continuation and unimpeded extension of the ministry of Jesus, and this has a huge impact on its ministry of healing.

The church has its share in the history of salvation, without a doubt. It is called to bear witness to the mighty acts of God past and present by proclaiming "God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11), the foremost of which is that God "in Christ . . . reconciled the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:18–19; see 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10). This proclamation cannot remain content with just passing on the requisite information or telling the story. It asks for corporeal authentication by appropriate actions of faith and hope (Col 3:1–17; Rom 13:11–14; Gal 5:22–26). This does not mean that the church has to vindicate God or that it is asked to demonstrate the might of the Holy Spirit by signs and wonders (Lk 21:12–19; Mt 10:17–22; Mk 13:9–13) as promulgated by the advocates of "power evangelism" and "power healing."<sup>13</sup> Rather, God vindicates the church (Matt 10:19–20; Lk 21:15; Mk 13:11). Nevertheless, the credibility of the church's proclamation hinges critically on the authentically lived corporeality of its witness (Matt 25:31–46; James 2:14–26). But just how do healings and the healing ministry

13. See the various books by John Wimber with Kevin Springer, such as *Power Evangelism—Signs and Wonder Today*, 1985; *Power Healing*, 1986; and *Study Guide to Power Healing*, 1987 (all London: Hodder & Stoughton); Peter C. Wagner, *Seven Power Principles That I Didn't Learn in Seminary* (Colorado Springs: Wagner, 2000); Ché Ahn, *The Authority of the Believer and Healing* (Colorado Springs: Wagner, 1999); and Ché Ahn, *How to Pray for Healing* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003).

come into play, if not as signs of might and power?

I have argued above that the goal of the ministry of Jesus was to reinstate the God-likeness of all humans. This later became the well-known leitmotif for Christian *caritas* as well. Surveying the history of the church, one cannot but give due honor and credit to the many works of charity that people felt called to do for the betterment of their fellow human beings and the alleviation of suffering “in the name of Christ.” They intended to help those marginalized by society and those suffering from a lack of the basic needs for life to experience tangibly that there is a loving God who cares for them, despite and within their misery. Thus from its very beginnings (Acts 6:1–6) until the present, the history of the church is also one of genuine compassion and care, entailing the establishment of institutions and programs devoted to *caritas*. And while the healing ministry pursues the same objective, it acts in a particular and highly distinctive way, namely, by drawing attention, in a very strict and literal sense, to the bodily and corporeal dimension of salvation.

The proclamation of the gospel attempts to bring people back into the presence of the living God as it was in the very beginning. The good news of the gospel is that their original integrity is restored to humans by the reconciliation brought about once and for all in Christ (Rom 6:1–11; Heb 7:27). Such decisive restoration of humankind is commonly termed “salvation” and has also fittingly been described as “healing.”<sup>14</sup> It is the proper task of the church to make the restoration to original integrity known to all. Since this proclamation will always have to make reference to the passion, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as to the life of believers and the life of the church, it cannot but

be mindful of corporeality. If it were not, it would mock the incarnation and disgrace God the Creator. Also, this proclamation must never forget the promise that in the end God “will wipe away every tear” and that “death will be no more” (Rev 21:4).

And yet, while seeking to bring about healing, it will again and again have to be painfully realized that the positive outcome of all such efforts can never be definitely guaranteed. There always remains a noticeable discrepancy between claim or promise and the actual result. This holds true for scientific medicine practiced in hospitals and for the workings of medicines and charismatic healers. No less does it hold true for the healing ministry exercised in churches and by prayer groups. Indeed, the church cannot claim to have control over healing as a demonstrative sign of God’s presence and supreme power. Healing is not a dispensable commodity, even for those who hold themselves to be genuinely pious believers.<sup>15</sup> Quite to the contrary, very often healing simply does not take place in spite of all endeavors.

14. The *Formula of Concord* describes the ministry of Jesus, the *restitutio ad integritatem* as “healing” the “rift” between God and humanity. See *Solid Declaration I—Concerning Original Sin, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 511. For the medical maxim of *restitutio ad integrum* and its relation to the *restitutio ad integritatem*, see H. Schipperges, “Motivation und Legitimation des ärztlichen Handelns,” in *Krankheit, Heilkunst, Heilung*, ed. H. Schipperges, E. Seidler, and P. Unschuld (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1978), 482ff.

15. Everett I. Carver totally misses this point when he states: “As long as Christ has true followers upon earth—persons who truly believe in Him and His promises—sick people will be healed through the laying on of hands and the exercising of faith” (“Divine

Rather than ignoring this dilemma, Christians will consciously acknowledge it and thereby rise to their calling. Instead of proving God right, the church has to be watchful not to take God's place or attempt to command God, the Holy Spirit. What the church is called to do is to let God truly be God by praying fervently with the afflicted and on behalf of the suffering, desperately longing for a turn to the better. While such empathy might well have the impact of some kind of relief on those immediately concerned, it should not lead to the assumption that this fulfills the goals of the healing ministry. Euphemistically deeming any felt relief as "healing" where there is actually none is to the detriment of both the suffering individual and the healing ministry. This happens when it is declared that God always "heals" while humans merely "cure."<sup>16</sup>

We should refrain from sugarcoating grim situations by entertaining convictions like these, not only because they separate what actually is one but also because they disgrace the work of the Creator and discredit the labors of all those who are honestly engaged in bringing about healing by their expertise in the various fields of medicine and in the healing professions. Further, broadening the meaning of healing to such an extreme so dilutes it that it becomes void of any specificity, in this case its corporeal dimension. There are, however, strident arguments to do just that in order to avoid facing the embarrassing dilemma of the obvious disparity between claim and outcome, between promise and fulfillment. But easing the sting by spiritualizing healing corrupts the ministry inasmuch as it suggests that such activity is always successful, totally ignoring that healing is not at the handy disposal of anyone and is always just a provisional mending, preventing untimely death, not death as such.

Of course, this constant defeat frustrates many. In a scientific, secular setting such an experience leads to indifferent professionalism on the part of experts and to fatalistic desperation on the part of patients. In the context of charismatic or "power" healing, such desperation may bring about depression in those who sought healing in vain, the disappointment of their false hopes eventually leading to loss of faith, at the same time that the "faith-healers" will refuse to reckon with failures threatening their authority.<sup>17</sup> But Christians, certain "that in hope" they are "saved" (Rom 8:24), face this situation without becoming paralyzed or disillusioned. Faithful to the healing mandate, they keep on "hoping against hope" (Rom 4:18) amidst all setbacks, which they, too, experience painfully. But the strength and power of their witness lies precisely in always beseeching God fervently to make himself known as the savior while at the same time refraining from trying to prove God right. That is God's very own work. Consciously facing and existentially enduring this tension by clinging to the promise of corporeal restitution is the unique contribution of the healing ministry. Without it the church will simply forget that its being is eschatological (see 2 Cor 1:22, 5:1-5; Eph 1:13-14; Rev 21:1-22:5).

---

Healing," in *Dynamics of the Faith—Evangelical Christian Foundations*, ed. G. Miller, M. Gaulke, and D. Smith [Panama City, FL: Gulf-Coast Bible College, 1972], 284.)

16. A good collection of such contemporary healing stories is *Here is My Hope—A Book of Healing and Prayer: Inspirational Stories from The Johns Hopkins Hospital*, ed. R. Henderson and R. Marek (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

17. For a critical look at so-called faith healings see Richard J. Brenneman, *Deadly Blessings: Faith Healing on Trial* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1990).

# Contextualization for Ministry and the Lutheran Heritage

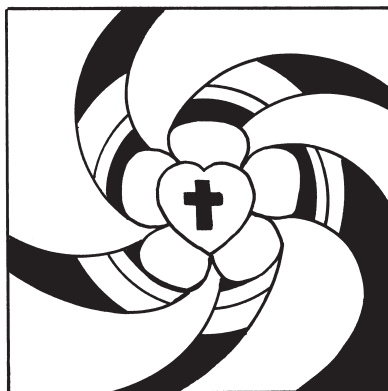
---

Albert Pero, Jr.

*Professor of Systematic Theology  
and Cross-Cultural Studies Emeritus  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

During my tenure as a Teaching Theologian I often have reflected on what it means to be a Black person within the Lutheran denomination. I perceived that the best way to determine the solution would be to engage African Lutherans in the diaspora in dialogue concerning this issue.

In the initial coming together of African and African American theologians and church leaders, we held a Conference of International Black Lutherans (CIBL) at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Africa, September 4–12, 1986, to explore what it means for us to be both Black and Confessional Lutherans. A summary of this conference is found in *Theology and the Black Experience*.<sup>1</sup> An additional summary appears on the opening page of that



book by Philip Hefner, who captured the Conference understanding of the Lutheran Heritage by asserting the following:

The theologians whose essays are included in this book demonstrate beyond all doubt that Lutheranism, as a theological and doctrinal reality, is pluralistic at a very deep level. These men and women have articulated their own traditions of Lutheranism, and they have reflected on the concrete situations in which they are called upon to be the theologians of the church. In the process, they have made it evident that the Lutheran traditions take hold in different places in different ways and give rise to distinctively different theological expressions.

This kind of diversity in Lutheranism has not been acknowledged up to this time. We have recognized that Lutherans have diverse cultural patterns, as well as a variety of ways of worshiping and living out their faith. But we have not recognized so clearly that there is also a variety of theological interpretations of the tradition, and that each of these interpretations has its own full authenticity and legitimacy. These black theologians are now in the process of awakening the Lutheran consciousness to this fundamental theological pluralism.

This book demonstrates that there is more than one way to be Lutheran—*theologically*. This alone makes it a theological event of significance.

Hefner summarized further what our conference produced by stating that we have operated on the mistaken principle that if Lutheran doctrine were taught correctly and learned correctly, it would turn out to be the same, whether taught and learned in Heidelberg, Chicago, Makumira, Hong Kong, Brazil, or Buenos Aires.

As Carl Braaten has said, Lutherans have had no doctrine of doctrinal pluralism, no theology of theological pluralism. Lutheranism indeed may not have taken the pluralism of the white sisters and brothers seriously, but it will not be able to overlook the significance of the pluralism that emerges from the Black sisters and brothers—and that is emerging from the

Asian and Latin American brothers and sisters and from the Lutheran feminists. This means that the Blacks may well constitute a breakthrough for all people.

What does this mean for our self-understanding as Lutherans? We may view the growth of Lutheran faith and life as the radiation of Lutheran perspectives from the heartland in Wittenberg out to the peripheries. The task in this view is to measure what happens in the peripheries by what was started in Wittenberg and determine thereby whether the peripheral action is adequate or not, simplistic or not. The things that have emerged on the peripheries have no intrinsic value.

An alternative picture is to see the radiation moving in the other direction—from the various sectors of the circle, and from the periphery of that circle, into the center. If the center represents what Lutheranism truly is, then the center is truly what the other sectors of the circles contribute to it. The center does not measure the rest of the circle, but rather the center is constituted by the contributions of the whole of the circle to the center.

In the first view, what is genuinely Lutheran is easy to grasp. It is what is in the center, and that is something relatively simple—it emanated from Luther and his cohorts. In the second view, genuine Lutheranism is everywhere in the circle. It is present in a special way in the center, to be sure, but not because the center is the only genuine thing; it is because the center holds the contributions of the whole, of the many parts. For this reason the center may be almost impossible to grasp fully, because it is a many, not a one; a diversity, not a

---

1. "A Message from Harare," in *Theology and the Black Experience*, ed. Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 264 ff.

uniformity; a dynamic process, not a one-time gift. This is a new self-understanding for Lutherans.

What does all this imply for our theological methodology? It means that we cannot really undertake Lutheran theology unless we attend both to the richness of the various parts of the circle and also to the richness of the center. This implies further that each of the Lutheran cultures must cultivate its own particularity with energy, devotion, and a sense of the larger whole.

The basic principle underlying ministry in a multicultural church is contextual. In context we find the key to the nature of unity in diversity. Therefore we explore ministry in this paper within the scope of a multicultural context in North America using the African American culture as paradigm. We must begin to think of ministry and other dogmatic issues from the point of view of many cultures, and not merely the straight line from Europe, if we take seriously Lutheranism's self-definition as being a multicultural global church.

### **Contextuality for ministry**

My attempt to offer diverse perspectives on the function of ministry should rid us of one monolithic view of ministry and posit the secret of God's unity, namely, God's diversity within the priesthood of all believers. The challenge of ministry is in its diversity; its victory will be in its unity in the risen living Christ. Among the greatest heresies of the past were speaking in behalf of the people without consulting the people, being concerned about the soul at the expense of the body, and preaching the gospel with little or no concern for the context. I submit that text without context is a pretext.

To raise the question "What is the context of a pastor's ministry?" is to raise a host of questions related to our understanding of the nature of God, of humanity, of the

Bible, of history, of Jesus Christ, and of the church. We must ask these kinds of questions because the ministry of the gospel denotes an activity that has its origin in the heart and will of God, which embraces both the indigenous culture as well as the entire world and all that happens in it, and that is directed at the total life of people in and out of the congregations in this world and their eternal destiny. How a pastor answers these basic questions under the tutelage of the people in a given context, or, more particularly, how a pastor applies the answers in a given cultural context and place in history, has a critical bearing on the methodology of his or her ministry in that time and place.

### **The nature of contextuality**

By *context* we mean those patterns and language of a culture that most distinguish it from other cultures. Some synonyms for context are *culture*, *indigenous*, *ethos*, and *particularity*.

It goes without saying that the modern individual exists in a pluralistic world, migrating back and forth between competing and complementary cultures. It is relatively easy to be a Lutheran in a social situation where one can readily limit one's significant others to fellow Lutherans. The story is quite different in a situation where one is compelled to rub shoulders with a variety of "others," where one is saturated with communications that deny, reject, or ignore Lutheran ideas, and where one has a difficult time even finding some quiet Lutheran corner in which to withdraw. While the Lutheran Church has much to offer a pluralistic society, it must be big enough to accept the different lifestyles these cultures bring with them if it is to have any relevance to them at all. Once we grasp the context to which the gospel is applied, we also must grasp the inability of people to jump out of their skins.

We reject the approach to the gospel that stresses universality apart from particularity. There is no universality apart from the particularity of the gospel. The proclamation is always directed not toward

---

**T**he proclamation is always directed not toward humankind in general but toward humankind wrapped in all of its cultural diversity.

---

humankind in general but toward humankind wrapped in all of its cultural diversity. In Lutheran terms, the law must be related to the context of the people so that the gospel can free them to live God's life in that context. Douglas John Hall has put it well:

What has achieved the reputation of theology in North American church and society is not only noncontextual, it is anticontextual. Most Christians do not regard Christian theology as a mode of engaging this historical cultural, socioeconomic milieu. On the contrary, where they consider the subject at all, laypersons tend to think of theology as a more or less fixed set of beliefs, contained in embryo in the Bible, codified in various historical creeds, confessions and faith statements, refined in forbidding volumes of doctrine, and relayed to congregations in simplified form through sermon, catechetical instruction, and (for a few) college classes in religious knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

For Christians true contextuality means initiating and nurturing dialogue with one's

culture, a partnership in discovery and investigation of the truths of the gospel. To put it concretely, it is possible for us to learn from each other. Tillich in his book *Theology of Culture*<sup>3</sup> speaks of the Christian community as a participator with the world. Therefore to know one's context is to participate in one's context. "When one is conscious of contextualization, one becomes aware that there is no such thing as non-contextual human thought, including theological thought."<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate one form of alienation, I turn to the Europeanization of the Christian theological tradition. Many of the formulations of Christian doctrines echo the many diverse movements involving European civilization. For example, with the development of the doctrine of atonement, one can see the history of Europe's anxieties and its ways of coping with anxieties. For all kinds of reasons this European theological contextuality in several typical forms (Augustinian, Thomistic, Calvinistic, Pietistic) has been permitted to conduct itself throughout the inhabited world as if it were not contextual but universal. This clearly is a misappropriation and misunderstanding of Tradition as a source of theology.

K. E. Skydsgaard gives us a clear and penetrating survey of tradition.<sup>5</sup> Tradition with a large *T* is the "holy Tradition" where

---

2. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 69.

3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1964).

4. Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 76f. See also p. 93 for an in-depth explanation on the why of contextual theology.

5. K. E. Skydsgaard. "Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology." In *The Old and the New in the Church*. WCC. Paul Minear Commission on Faith and Order (Augsburg, 1961), 22–35.

we find the teachings of the Lord and the apostles in doctrinal, doxological, liturgical, and sacramental forms. Tradition with a small *t* is a given culture's indigenous or particular Christian tradition. Skydsgaard states that true tradition and freedom belong together, but in the history of our traditions we see how all too often human traditions come to be much more than supports for the Christian life and instead become positive controls and norms for human conscience. When they become that, members of the church quickly cease to be temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and become simply curators of a vast museum of relics left by their Spirit-guided ancestors. These are the conditions we must take into account no matter which culture we belong to within the institutional church. We must be careful not to see our own Christian cultural tradition as *the* Christian Tradition. All of the various Christian cultural traditions have a right to existence only insofar as they are vehicles for God's revelation.

The nature of contextualization always causes theological discourse. Theology, like all intellectual academic disciplines, moves very close to ideology. Subsequently, all human knowledge will always become an ideological tainted product.<sup>6</sup> To determine the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*) is the whole vocation of theological discourse. The Christian community must have access to the sources within its host culture in order to proclaim the proper usage of the kerygma (law/gospel).

The Christian community is always engaged in cultural transcendence<sup>7</sup> and immersion in the context. We can express Christian identity (Baptism) only by being immersed in the cultural context, plunged beneath the threatening waters of sin that grace might abound. In 1999 CIBL gathered in celebration of the Lutheran Refor-

mation and the subsequent historic signing of the joint Catholic and Lutheran declaration on the doctrine of justification in Augsburg, Germany. We must remain aware that these glad tidings have come to African and African Americans clothed in German and English cultures and preserved in sixteenth-century doctrines of salvation, yet intended for twenty-first-century sinners.

My thesis is that the pastor's and the congregation's ministry can become what God has called them to be as people only immersed in their context. Tillich, using exclusive language typical of his context, asserts that a Christian pastor

must participate in the human predicament, not only actually—as he always does—but also in conscious identification. He must participate in man's finitude, which is also his own, and its anxiety, as though he had never received the revelatory answer of "eternity." He must participate in man's estrangement which is also his own, and show the anxiety of guilt, as though he had never received the revelatory answer of "forgiveness." The theologian does not rest on the theological answer which he announces. He can give it in a convincing way only if he participates with his whole being in the situation of the question, namely, the human predicament. In the light of this demand, the method of correlation protects the theologian from the arrogant claim of having revelatory answers at his disposal. In formulating the answer, he must struggle for it.<sup>8</sup>

In summation, one can identify several reasons why theology is contextual:

1. Theology is a human enterprise.
2. Theology attempts to speak of the

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 194f.

7. Albert Pero, Jr., "Cultural/Self Transcendence," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 20 (1993): 380–89.

8. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 15.

Living God and of God's relation to a dynamic creation.

3. Theology exists for the sake of the church's confession.

4. Contextualization is a conscious element in the theological enterprise.

5. Tradition is a source of theology.

6. Theological discourse is a necessary ingredient in examining the nature of contextualization.

7. Theology and the incorporation of stories from the big *T* (Tradition) and the little *t*.

8. Contextualization means both immersion in the context and cultural transcendence.

The argument of the entire Christian tradition is not with difference (rather it celebrates difference) but with divisiveness, brokenness, alienation, and segregation—distortion by human sin. The biblical God sends apostles and pastors to engage this reality. The theology of the cross describes the reconciling work of Jesus Christ who turns apparent destructiveness toward good and not evil. The point is not to dissolve distinction but to eliminate sin from it. Pastors must initiate a praxis of justice. They are to embrace the drive for prophetic faith and the universal understanding of God's reconciling work, and without losing the truth of the divine universality we are simultaneously to be engaged in the indigenous contexts. Faith will be contextualized and made specific in the relation to the culture. For example, love to the neighbor must function in a radically particularized way, for love is not a principle to be conceptualized but an event in which it is involved (see the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Conceptualization too often ends up in generalization.

Finally, it would be hard for me to see a global theology that did not root itself in culture. Conversely, it would be impos-

sible to pursue a theology of culture that did not lead to thinking of the whole. In correlating the two, the minister is aware that the universal thrust of the gospel prevents theology from becoming only indigenous, and the indigenous character of the gospel prevents theology from becoming merely theoretical or transcultural.

### **The nature, function, and call of the Holy Spirit to contextual ministry**

Luther puts it quite plainly in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed: I believe that the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel. The pastor who proclaims the gospel in word and deed makes a confession of faith in God the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who calls us by the gospel, enlightens us with his gifts, gives us faith, and convenes a congregation to hear the word. It is the Spirit who inspires the lessons of the day, and it is the Spirit who sanctifies the whole Christian church.

I am fully aware of the Lutheran church's reticence about referring to the Holy Spirit because of historical doctrinal positions. Some ministers and lay people would rather avoid the issue lest they be understood in terms of modern movements concerning the Holy Spirit. Others fear being caught up in an invisible presence we cannot domesticate nor control. How will I feel if I truly surrender myself to God? Rudolf Otto calls this strange feeling of attraction and dread *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>9</sup> It is the experience of God—an awesome experience, one so unthinkable in our scientific age that Wolfhart Pannenberg noted that the generation of the "death of God"

9. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), 12–13.

10. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (1983), 83.

theologians had a lost sense of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> No matter what we experience today, however, we are expected to give scientific explanation of a faith that often defies explanation. Yet, if we intend to get at the source and authority of our contextual witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we need some sense of the Spirit accompanied by power that is sufficient to deal with the reality of evil.

### **The call of Jesus—a model for our call to service**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented, and when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him and lo, a voice from heaven saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13–17)

We are told: “Here is my beloved Son, get out in the wilderness. That’s how much I love you. Get out in the wilderness.” That’s a different kind of love, it seems to me, than the kind that we’ve heard about.

In Luke 4, Jesus is sent or driven into the wilderness, tempted by the devil, and ministered to by the messengers of God’s love. Then Jesus returns from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit. One cannot talk about spirituality without talking about the wilderness; it can’t be done. Jesus returns from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit, comes into Galilee where a report concerning him went out to the surrounding country; he taught in the local synagogue, being glorified by all. He came to Nazareth where he had been brought up and went to the synagogue as was his custom on the Sabbath day; he stood up to read,

and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to feel good, to feel warm, to tell everybody how I’m anointed with the Spirit. No! He has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Wow! Isn’t he great? Filled with the Spirit!

But you all know the rest of that story, too. Jesus doesn’t find it to be adequate to be general about things. Jesus gets very specific with the folks. He gets very concrete about a particular group of outcasts, whom the Lord seems to love at least as much as he does the good folks. And when he started talking about the particular, the good synagogue folks say in essence, “Lord, now you’ve gone from preaching to meddling.” And they not only put him out but they try to do him in. How do you like that for spirituality?

Now let me try to say something about what all of this may mean for us. Spirituality is not only knowing that we are free; spirituality is knowing that we have been set free. It is knowing how we got free. And our freedom is a direct function of the redeeming, delivering, father/mother God. And we have been delivered, set free, not for our own selfish purposes but to serve God’s purposes in the winds of change.

Spirituality then is the way of being that finds us continually struggling to know what is my calling and what is going on here. Spirituality is that constant tension of trying to understand what it is that God is calling us to be and to do. It is that expect-

ant waiting on God and God's purposes more than they who wait for the morning. Spirituality at its deepest is recognizing the cleansing, frightening, empowering, but absolutely necessary role of the wilderness in our lives.

The wilderness is that time for fasting and for praying. The wilderness is that time and place for feeling sometimes parched and stretched out and attacked. Spirituality is recognizing that the wilderness presents continuous confrontation with our own demons, the demons who will not go away unless they are faced in utmost honesty. Spirituality is living in the presence of God's living, creating, healing spirit, recognizing that as we live in the presence of God's Spirit we are actually connected to all life.

To be anointed by the Spirit is to be anointed to action, or to praxis, as they say in some circles. To be anointed by the Spirit is to be commissioned for action for the poor, the outcast, the weak and exploited, the oppressed, and even the rich. Spirituality is living constantly with the blowing, driving, compelling, loving breath of God. "Breathe on me, breath of God"? Watch out! That breath of God can be a mighty powerful thing, pushing us, driving us, pulling us, upsetting us in ways that we never expected. Not just soothing us, and making us feel nice and warm all over. This is a wind that blows where it wishes. We have to be ready for it if we are concerned about spirituality, our spirituality. If it is based in the Spirit of God it is absolutely unpredictable and uncontrollable. Finally, there is no other deeper purpose for the ordained ministry in a multicultural context than to discover the face of God in the least of the sisters and the brothers.

There can be no authentic response to the Spirit for us unless it includes a call for help, a call for guidance. Precious Lord,

take our hands. Lead us to see, to know, to be, to do, whatever it means, to serve you in the wilderness of this historical moment in this very difficult time.

We are part of a long tradition of women and men who understood that their spiritual identity wasn't a Black identity or a blue, white, or brown identity, for that search for identity is not sufficient unless it is informed and washed with the Spirit. There are all kinds of searches for identity that have led to millions of dead people, so be careful of identity by itself. Identity without Spirit, identity without purpose, may be very dangerous. And we are a part of the people who have learned that, and knew that concern for identity without purpose can lead to chauvinism and death and murder and worse. And a concern for spirituality without service to the least can lead to nothing but empty piety. What a vision, that God has set free these Africans and slave people, not just to make it, not just to survive, but to speak to the nations of the world, a word in action that will make them and us free.

For me, Langston Hughes was a real spiritual man, even though he didn't always sound like it. There was something about him that was trying to find what is it that we should really be as human beings. He ends up one of his magnificent poems with these words about this country: "We the people must redeem our land, the mines, the plants, the rivers, the mountains, and the endless plain, and all the stretch of these great green states. We the people must redeem our land and make America again."

James Forbes lists a number of summary points that help our argument concerning the fundamental awareness of God's authority, power, appointment, and guidance for the vocation of the ministry. The dimensions are as follows:

1. Jesus had a unique relationship to

his heavenly parent. As only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, he stands in a class by himself.

2. Jesus was nurtured in his family and the family of faith.

3. Jesus reached the point of vocational readiness to get on with doing that for which he was sent into the world.

4. Jesus acted upon the impulse of the Spirit by obediently following the guidance to submit himself for baptism.

5. Jesus experienced sacramental grace, which comes when one acts in obedience.

6. Jesus experienced divine approval, acceptance, and appointment.

7. Jesus experienced power from beyond the self, from on high.

8. Jesus was tested in the wilderness where he was able to come to clarification of mission, methodology, and the system of guidance by which his work would be done.

9. Jesus experienced the ministry of angels.

10. Jesus demonstrated strength to bear witness in his community of faith regarding his spiritual formation for the vocation to which he had been called.<sup>11</sup>

The intention here is to call attention to an enriching understanding of spiritual formation for ministry in a multicultural context. To follow Jesus is the true route for the minister's faithfulness and fulfillment. Therefore, as the laity of the church stand in the power of their anointing they also stand in readiness for the ministry.

When wrestling with the demons of classism, sexism, and racism, we can count on the Spirit's help. Tillich notes this in one of his sermons:

The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice, telling you that your life is empty and meaningless, but that there are chances of a new life waiting before the door of

your inner self to fill its void and to conquer its dullness. The Spirit can work in you, awakening the desire to strive toward the sublime over against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you the courage which says yes to life in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced around you and within you.<sup>12</sup>

Each person knows her/his own contextual experience of how the Holy Spirit nourishes hope in the midst of hopelessness. I guess what we all share together is that we would not be here today if it were not for the blessings of God the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to say: "We've been to the mountaintop. And my eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord. I may not get there with you, but I know that we as a people will make it to the promised land."

It seems to me that a minister in a multicultural context who has experienced the ministry of the Holy Spirit has a head start on following Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Finally, all of us must offer ourselves as instruments for the continued development and understanding of a renewed spirit in our sacred vocations as pastors and laity.

---

11. James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 37f.

12. Tillich, *Spiritual Presence: The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner's, 1963).

13. H. Richard Niebuhr deals with this issue in *Christ and Culture*, chap. 3, and concludes that "It becomes more or less clear that it is not possible honestly to confess that Jesus is the Christ of culture unless one can confess much more than this" (p. 115).