

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

Journal for EMC theology and education

Volume 1 Number 1 December 2006

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of *Theodidaktos: Journal for EMC theology and education*. As we embark on this maiden voyage of the *Journal*, it is very important that you, the reader, recognize your role in keeping this ship afloat.

This *Journal* is groundbreaking for our Conference in that we have never before officially opened up dialogue on theology and education in this format. This publication *Theodidaktos: Journal for EMC theology and education* is officially sponsored by the Board of Church Ministries.

though to make such distinctions may be too drastic. But what value does theology have if it is not taught? And what value is there in education if it does not have a foundation of principle? This is, therefore, an appropriate relationship of two complementary fields of learning.

Theodidaktos means *taught by God* and comes from the words of Jesus in John 6:45 where he said, "It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me." God has revealed

Published occasionally and distributed freely under the authority of the Board of Church Ministries, Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 440 Main Street, Steinbach, Manitoba R5G 1Z5; emcmessenger@mts.net; 204-326-6401; www.emconf.ca. Inquiries and submissions to the editor can be sent to Editor, Theodidaktos, Box 129, Kleefeld, MB R0A 0V0; kemc@mts.net; 204-377-4773. Editor: Rev. Darryl G. Klassen. Copy editor/staff adviser: Terry M. Smith. Layout: Rebecca Buhler.

It is highly dependent on you, the reader, to also consider that you may need to be a writer, a contributor, and a critic (in the form of letters to the editor). This is your *Journal* for reflection and sharing. Let us reason together how we might "do" theology and education as a Conference.

It is highly dependent on you, the reader, to also consider that you may need to be a writer, a contributor, and a critic (in the form of letters to the editor). This is your *Journal* for reflection and sharing. Let us reason together how we might "do" theology and education as a Conference.

As you split the binding on this volume you will notice that you are engaging in a symbiotic (living) relationship of theology and education where one is not always distinguishable from the other. In other instances it will be very apparent that one is dealing with theology in its more cranial form.

Educational articles will in some instances be more application oriented,

himself to us and has taught us who He is through His Son, Jesus Christ. But none of us has a perfect revelation of God and therefore, as we are taught by God, we can share with each other what we have learned. This *Journal* is a medium where we have the opportunity to contribute to one another's understanding of God and His Church.

Some of this will come through the critical, reflective or systematic theological articles. These will serve as the larger part of our *Journal*. Three feature articles, dealing with different aspects of theology or education, lead this volume.

Applying these principles in our churches commences through

our sermons and Bible lessons or studies. One sermon reveals how our preachers are wrestling with the Scriptures and making them relevant for today's congregations.

Our *Journal* contains one book review on a contemporary issue. It is our hope that new and old books will be explored and shared. Older books that have long been forgotten still speak truth to our times; Phillips Brooks still speaks to us from the 19th century and so do many other wonderful writers.

And, of course, we welcome your response to what you read. Your letters of reflection and analysis will certainly help to round out our discussion of the critical issues and subjects the Church is facing in our world today.

So thank you for picking up this *Journal*, and enjoy the journey together with us as we are *taught by God*. ☉

Darryl G. Klassen
Editor

Preaching: More than joining theology and education

For many of us theology and education come together in the form of preaching. I am exposing my bias here, as I myself am a pastor who enjoys the art of preaching. That's right, I called it an art. Some of you may find that theology and education come together in other valid forms, such as teaching—be it in a Sunday school room or a college class, books, or some other medium. I highly endorse all forms of symbiosis (a living relationship) between theology and education.

Preaching in itself has not always been held in great esteem in our Conference. I recall a professor in college lecturing on the work of a pastor and telling an eager group of homiletics students that preaching was only ten percent of a pastor's work. A greater portion was dedicated to actual pastoral care, such as visiting the sick and elderly and making contact in the local café. Embedded in his comments was the implication that preaching was not very important, or at least, not as important as other work. Though not verbalized among EMCers, I take it that this is the general impression of most people in our Conference.

My own experience and reading has cast a far different shadow. Yes, the preacher has only 25 minutes or less on a Sunday morning to make an awe-inspiring point that will shatter the souls of his hearers, until Monday morning anyway. But is there not more to this art than a verbal tirade that puts men to sleep and dilates the pupils of the ladies who wonder, *why did the pastor choose that tie? Did his wife lose a battle this morning?* I believe that we have not taken this part of our mission seriously. If it is only ten percent of our jobs, then it is the most important ten percent of pastoral work.

If *kerygma* is proclamation, to preach—and tied to the New Testament, a proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ—that 25-minute session on Sunday morning may be the only formal time that the gospel is heard all week.

We seek new information, a how-to for my marriage problems or parenting skills, a message that will apply to my here-and-now. But our congregations have lost sight of the need for confession that Jesus is Saviour and Lord, that God is in heaven and that his feet rest on the earth, and that the Holy Spirit is moving in our hearts and churches to accomplish his work with or without us. It needs to be heard and pastors ought to be wrecked in their souls throughout the week—weeping, praying and studying over such magnificent truth—so that when they preach people will say, “He's been to heaven and back.”

I fear that we have relegated preaching as the marriage of theology and

Rather than trying to fit the latest social problem into a message, congregations need to hear a proper exegesis of scripture and how the Bible really does speak to today's ills. Such a one who “correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) will find that the timeless message of the Bible is relevant and will not have to fabricate an application.

education to a dusty shelf next to the hymnbook and choir folder. It should not be. There is a pure and simple work in this preaching that operates on the heart of hearers to better them whether they know it or not.

Rather than trying to fit the latest social problem into a message, congregations need to hear a proper exegesis of scripture and how the Bible really does speak to today's ills. Such a one who “correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) will find that the timeless message of the Bible is relevant and will not have to fabricate an application.

Content is not the issue, as much as it is passion. Others of non-Mennonite persuasion but of Evangelical character have often come out blazing with passion and conviction, making what they say somehow more believable. Does it make it more believable?

If you recently watched the movie *Walk the Line* about Johnny Cash, you will recall the scene where Cash is trying to audition for a record company. Singing gospel songs he had grown up on, Cash sounded a little flat. The interviewer stopped him and said Cash did not sing like he believed what he was preaching. Cash then sang a song that came from the heart and the rest is history. Such insight is needed when we step into the pulpits. Somebody needs to challenge us and ask if we believe what we are preaching. And do we believe that preaching has a place in the life of the Church? Karl Barth declared that it did when he said:

“It is simply a truism, that there is nothing more important, more urgent, more helpful, more redemptive and more salutary, there is nothing, from the viewpoint of heaven and earth, more relevant to the real situation than the speaking and the hearing of the Word of God in the originative and regulative power of its truth, in its all-eradicating and all-reconciling earnestness, in the light that it casts not only upon time and time's confusions but also beyond, towards the brightness of eternity, revealing time and eternity through each other and in each other—the Word, the Logos, of the living God.”

Such is the mysterious power of proclamation. And it is my desire that we should gain such a revelation of speaking the Word that hungry people could truly be fed. It is more than theology and education that are met in preaching; there is an experience of one who is convicted with the majesty of our God, convicting others of the reality of the presence of One so great that none of us is the same again. ☉

Darryl G. Klassen

A Christian Response to Suicide

Ed Peters

Ed Peters is Senior Pastor of the Evangelical Fellowship Church (EMC) in Steinbach, Manitoba.

As a young pastor beginning in ministry, it was not long before I was called to minister in the wake of suicide. What can be said to those experiencing the mixture of grief, confusion and anger that is often associated with such a death? Is there any hope for the one who committed this act of self-murder? What would God say? How should the church react? Family members often look to the pastor for such answers. Clearly a biblical framework that can guide our response is necessary.

Suicide: An Historical Perspective

In developing a theological understanding to the issues concerning suicide, one must turn first to the Biblical record to determine what is taught regarding the act of self-murder. There are a number of places where Scripture speaks directly to this issue. In the Old Testament there are four clear cases of suicide listed. There is also one instance that could be described as a *suicide killing*, in which the avenger intentionally perishes along

Taking these suicide accounts as a whole, it is surprising—especially given the Church’s firm stand against suicide—that there is not a stronger statement against this final act of self-destruction. Indeed, there appears to be ambiguity toward the act itself. In most instances, suicide is simply treated by the biblical narrator as another death, giving no sense of it being a sin.

side his enemies; and one that may be described as euthanasia or *mercy killing*.

The story of Abimelech, son of the great hero and judge Gideon is found in Judges 9. In a military campaign

against the city of Thebez, Abimelech is leading the assault upon the “strong tower” where men and women fled for refuge. There, a woman drops an upper millstone on him causing a fatal head wound. Not wanting to face the humiliation of being killed by a woman using a domestic implement, Abimelech commands his armour-bearer, “Draw your sword and kill me” (Judges 9:54).

The biblical narrator tells us that his death was God’s punishment for his wickedness. No particular judgment is placed on the command given to the armour-bearer.

While Abimelech is largely unknown, there is another judge who is perhaps one of the best known individuals of the Old Testament: Samson. Judges 16:23–31 records the story of how Samson, now a blinded captive, is brought before the assembled dignitaries and crowd of onlookers to be the object of their ridicule. Led to rest between the pillars supporting the roof of the temple, Samson prays; “Remember me, O Lord God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge...*Let me die with the Philistines!*” God granted his prayer.

Examining more explicit cases of suicide, one must consider Saul, Israel’s first king, and his armour-bearer. First Samuel 31 describes Saul’s last battle against the Philistines. Critically wounded, Saul turns to his armour-bearer and commands, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me” (verse 4). But since his armour-bearer refused, the Scriptures say he “took his own sword and fell on it.” The armour-bearer sees his king die in this manner and does the same. Like Abimelech, Saul preferred to die honourably rather than to survive for a few more hours and then die abjectly.

Another suicide recorded in the Old Testament is that of Ahithophel,



advisor to King David. In the rebellion against David, led by his David’s son Absalom, Ahithophel abandoned his king and joined forces with the rebels. As counselor to Absalom, Ahithophel proposed a military strategy that would have destroyed David. However, his counsel was rejected so that the LORD might “bring disaster on Absalom” (2 Samuel 17:14).

Realizing his counsel had not been followed, and understanding the consequences of this for himself and his family, the Scriptures say Ahithophel “saddled his donkey and set out for his house in his hometown. He put his house in order and then hanged himself. So he died and was buried in his father’s tomb” (2 Samuel 17:23).

A final Old Testament suicide account is the story of Zimri, king of Israel. Zimri led a brief but bloody *coup* against Baasha in which the king and all his family were killed. Zimri then assumed the throne of the Northern Kingdom for a mere seven days. Upon news of the coup, Omri, commander of Israel’s southern armies, marched against Zimri in the capital city of

Tirzah. The end was quick. “When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the royal palace and set the palace on fire around him. So he died” (1 Kings 16:18).

The New Testament records only one suicide—that of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. The account is recorded in Matthew 27:3–10 and Acts 1:18–19. It is interesting to note that neither Matthew nor Luke condemn Judas for the act of suicide itself; the disapproval is focused on the act of betrayal, not the manner of death of the betrayer.

Taking these suicide accounts as a whole, it is surprising—especially given the Church’s firm stand against suicide—that there is not a stronger statement against this final act of self-destruction. Indeed, there appears to be ambiguity toward the act itself. In most instances, suicide is simply treated by the biblical narrator as another death, giving no sense of it being a sin.

While horror and condemnation is sometimes expressed regarding the individual’s sins and shortcomings, the manner of their deaths is not in itself condemned. There is also no evidence of desecration, abandonment, or lack of care for the bodies of those who committed suicide, as there was later in history—particularly in medieval times when “self-murderers” were denied Christian burial and were often buried naked with a wooden stake through the body.¹

While Biblical principles can provide a further understanding to the act of suicide, in terms of specific examples we must conclude that Scripture does not directly condemn suicide. Given this conclusion, one must question why Christianity has attached such a negative stigma to suicide. Further, the Roman

Catholic community has traditionally viewed suicide as a mortal sin from which there is no forgiveness.²

“Suicide is intrinsically evil...and no circumstances can ever justify it.”³

While the teaching among Protestants has generally been less harsh, there remains a strong stigma of shame attached to suicide. Even today, family members of one who has committed suicide may question if the community of faith will allow a “church funeral” for their loved one.⁴ Given the Bible’s ambiguity on the subject, it appears most extreme to speak of suicide as “unpardonable.” Where does this suggestion come from? To answer this we must examine what the Church has said regarding suicide in the past.

There are two theologians in particular that have significantly shaped Christian thinking on the subject of suicide down through the ages. The first Christian writer to unequivocally condemn suicide was St. Augustine. In his book, *The City of God*, written about AD 415, Augustine uses the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” as the basis for the prohibition against suicide.⁵ This position, however, was confronted with difficulties given the fact that Samson, who is numbered among the “heroes of faith” (Hebrews 11), also committed suicide.

To explain this apparent discrepancy, Augustine points out that there are exceptions to the law against murder, specifically when death is divinely commanded. Therefore, in the case of Samson’s self-inflicted death, Augustine reasoned that, “the Spirit who wrought wonders by him had given him secret instructions to do this [kill himself].”⁶ In creating this loophole, Augustine could maintain his position that all suicide is morally unforgivable, while

still upholding Samson as a “hero of faith.”

The difficulty with this position is that the Bible presents no evidence of “secret instructions” divinely given to Samson, saying he should take his own life. If one takes this position, then why not suggest that all those who commit suicide have received secret instructions from God? Nevertheless, the impact of Augustine’s writings cannot be overstated, as his apologetic against suicide became the official stance, particularly for the Roman Catholic Church from about AD 450 right to the present day.⁷

The challenge for today is to present a balanced theology, one that focuses not only on the ethics of suicide but also one that addresses a compassionate response to families impacted by suicide.

It should be pointed out, however, that Augustine’s position on suicide was forged during a period in which there was a long-standing tradition of great heroes who were willing to die for their country or their convictions. In fact, by the middle of the second century there was a large group in the Church who believed that the only true way to be a witness was to die a martyr. Eventually the ideals of the early martyrs were accepted and resulted in the “victim” deliberately courting death.⁸

It is against this backdrop that Augustine’s work is set. One of his concerns in writing *The City of God* was to demonstrate to his readers that seeking death is not an appropriate way of demonstrating faith.

Later, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas further developed the Church’s teaching on suicide. Aquinas argued that suicide is always a mortal sin for three reasons. First, it goes against natural inclinations of self-love and protection. Second, suicide injures the community in which one belongs. Third, life is a gift given to man by God and is not ours to take.⁹ These arguments—though sometimes disputed—have shaped the thinking of many later theologians and are still widely used by the Church and society as a whole.

1 Mark Williams, *Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide and Self-Harm* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 3.

2 G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 43.

3 R. J. Schork, “Suicide” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, XIII, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1967), 782.

4 I was asked this question while serving as a pastor in British Columbia. I assured the grieving family that we would indeed allow the funeral to take place in the church.

5 Augustine, *The City of God* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons) Book 1, Section 20, 26.

6 *Ibid.*, 27.

7 G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 75.

8 *Ibid.*, 74.

9 G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 77.

While such arguments have helped to define the Church's position regarding the ethical nature of suicide, its weakness is the failure to address the reality of this tragedy and its underlining causes. The traditional teaching on suicide has, in effect, become a theology of condemnation and shame.

Earl Grollman, in his book *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention*, argues that the individual contemplating suicide is already suffering from a heavy burden of guilt. By speaking of suicide as an immoral act, one may in fact block the possibility of further intervention and contribute to the individual's present sense of discouragement and depression. "For the suicidal person, self-destruction is not a theological issue; it is the result of unbearable emotional stress."¹⁰

The challenge for today is to present a balanced theology, one that focuses not only on the ethics of suicide but also one that addresses a compassionate response to families impacted by suicide. Furthermore, a theology is needed that addresses the new societal pressures that frequently lead to this final devastating act.

Suicide: The changing landscape

In 1997, Stats Canada reported the suicide rate in Canada as 12.3 per 100,000 (19.6 per 100,000 among males and 5.1 per 100,000 among females). This is average among industrialized countries. Generally, men are at least twice as likely to commit suicide as women.¹¹ These percentages have not varied significantly over the last century.

Among faith communities it is generally observed that Protestants are more likely than Catholics and Jews to commit suicide.¹² It should be noted, however, that statistical studies that have examined suicide in various faith communities generally define these communities very broadly. Nevertheless, the fact remains that while churchgoing in general is associated with a lower suicide risk,¹³ the Church is by no means exempt from its painful reality.

Among the more disturbing statistical trends is the rise of teenage suicide—particularly among young

men. In the 1990s, the United States found itself with one of the highest suicide rates for young men in the world, exceeding even Japan and Sweden, countries with notoriously high suicide rates.¹⁴

A sense of isolation can be dangerous for the depressed person. The sense that life holds no significance to those around me lends legitimacy to suicidal feelings. Susceptibility to suicide is lowest among those who have strong community ties.

Of particular interest to those wishing to respond biblically to these problems is the changing motives that drive suicidal behaviour. Whereas in the past, suicide appeared to be closely tied to concepts of honour and physical hardship, today we observe suicides that are connected more closely to emotional pain such as isolation, stress and depression. Furthermore, with medical advances being made that prolong life among the aged and the seriously ill, physician-assisted suicide has become a hotly-contested issue and must be considered when developing a theological response to suicide.

Contributing factors and the Church's response

Mark Williams, in his book *Cry of Pain*, suggests that it is not sufficient to view suicide as simply a cry for help; it is, in effect, a cry of distressing pain. This perspective is intended to capture the way in which behaviour can communicate without communication being the main motive.¹⁵ Indeed, it is

often unclear what motive lies behind the act of suicide. In many cases, there is likely a mixture of motives. But for the sake of clarity and brevity, I will address individually three common suicidal factors.

Isolation: A sense of isolation can be dangerous for the depressed person. The sense that life holds no significance to those around me lends legitimacy to suicidal feelings. In cultures such as Nigeria, where greater value is placed on community as opposed to individualism, it is interesting to note that suicide is virtually nonexistent.¹⁶ Susceptibility to suicide is lowest among those who have strong community ties.¹⁷

This is why Thomas Aquinas emphasized suicide as a sin against the community. The apostle Paul said of the Church that we "should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Corinthians 12:25b–26a). Our lives are interconnected, and suicide can be extremely painful for the community to cope with. But for the individual contemplating suicide it is difficult to see this clearly. Therefore, it is the obligation of the community to affirm the significance that each member has within their group.

In this respect, the Church is uniquely equipped to be a model for society of what loving and accepting communities look like. Indeed, involvement in church groups is often attributed to lowering the risk of suicide by providing the sympathy, love and mutual concern often missing in families.¹⁸

Nevertheless, despite the best efforts to provide meaningful community and support, suicide may still occur. In such cases it is crucial

10 Earl A. Grollman, *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 88.

11 *Ibid.*, 32.

12 Ronald W. Maris, *Pathways to Suicide: A Survey of Self-Destructive Behaviors* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 244.

13 Mark Williams, *Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide and Self-Harm* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 33.

14 *Ibid.*, 41.

15 *Ibid.*, xii.

16 Ronald W. Maris, *Pathways to Suicide: A Survey of Self-Destructive Behaviors* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981)

17 Earl A. Grollman, *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 97.

18 *Ibid.*

to provide non-judgmental support to surviving family members. Lloyd and Gwendolyn Carr, authors of *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide*, speak of their own experience after their daughter-in-law committed suicide. Feelings of loss and shame threatened to push them into isolation. But there was also “a deep, almost unconscious awareness that even if we didn’t feel like worship and fellowship, we needed to be with God’s people.”¹⁹ Later, in reflecting upon their decision to seek out the fellowship of friends and church members, they realized this was the beginning of the healing process.

When Derek Humphry’s book *Final Exit* was published in 1991, with its detailed discussion of the best way of ending life, it sold more than 500,000 copies in its first year. These and other events have challenged the Church to develop a new understanding of life and death—particularly in relation to the elderly and terminally ill.

Depression: Another very significant factor in the occurrence of suicide is depression. Depression may be a state of emotional despair brought on by circumstances or it may be biological in nature. When despair is the result of circumstances, it is often because people have put their primary hope for meaning and joy in the wrong places—such as relationships, jobs, or material possessions.

While it is natural to grieve the loss of such things, we should not, especially as Christians, totally despair at their collapse. In such a case the duty

of the Church is to call people back to God as the ultimate source of meaning and hope. Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that while God’s people are called to be messengers bringing God’s healing and justice to society, we also must live with deferred hope.

As the Apostle Paul makes clear, though we have already received the first fruits of the Spirit, we continue to “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

With respect to depression that is biological in nature, the Church needs to exercise greater understanding and compassion. It is estimated that perhaps as many as 20 percent of people are predisposed toward suffering some kind of mental illness²⁰ and that the great majority of people who have committed suicide suffered from a diagnosable mental illness.²¹

Instead of accusing those prone to depression as requiring “more faith,” the Church needs provide support and assistance in identifying those in need of diagnosis and treatment. Stemming suggests that the Church “has been instrumental in forging and perpetuating the stigma that haunts mental illness and suicide. It now has the responsibility to proclaim its compassion for the mentally ill, the suicidal and those who die by suicide.”²²

Some steps churches can take in this direction include talking about depression openly as a biological illness. Church libraries can also be stocked with books on the subject and make available up-to-date directories of medical and social services to which people can be referred if necessary. When treatment is ineffective and intervention fails, Christian hope offers something that therapeutic hope cannot: The promise that the sufferer remains loved by God.²³

Pain: As a whole, society generally frowns upon suicide and agrees that it represents a tremendous tragedy, both socially and individually. However, it is not as unified concerning the issue of physician-assisted suicide. This ethical conundrum has been hotly contested. In Canada, individuals such as Sue Rodriguez forced the “right-to-die” debate into the spotlight as her body withered under a terminal illness in the early 1990s.

A decade later, the issue hit the headlines again as Montreal police charged a 59-year-old woman with aiding suicide in the death of her playwright son in late September 2004. A Gallup poll, taken in 1995, showed 77 percent of Canadians support voluntary euthanasia, a rise from 68 percent in 1986.²⁴ In 1997, Oregon enacted the first and, so far, only physician-assisted suicide law in the United States known as the “Death with Dignity Act.”

When Derek Humphry’s book *Final Exit* was published in 1991, with its detailed discussion of the best way of ending life, it sold more than 500,000 copies in its first year.²⁵ These and other events have challenged the Church to develop a new understanding of life and death—particularly in relation to the elderly and terminally ill.

For the medical community, the key ethical issue surrounding mercy killing concerns the criterion used for assessing potential candidates for physician-assisted suicide. Is the patient depressed? What will define “terminally ill”? What would be considered appropriate motivation in requesting euthanasia: The elimination of pain? The desire not to be “a burden” on others? Given the growth in demographics of the elderly and the fact that they are frequent users of health care, what role will economics play in deciding when a patient is a candidate for assisted suicide?

Detractors to physician-assisted suicide point out that creating a “right” to assisted suicide “will endanger society and send a false signal that a less than perfect life is not worth living...physician-assisted suicide introduces a deep ambiguity into the very definition of medical care, if care comes to involve killing.”²⁶

19 G. Lloyd Carr and Gwendolyn C. Carr, *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 33.

20 Mary T. Stimming, “Grace in the Face of Suicide,” *The Christian Century* (March 8, 2000): 273.

21 *Ibid.*, 272.

22 *Ibid.*, 273.

23 *Ibid.*, 274.

24 Denyse O’Leary, “Teetering on the Edge of Legalization” *Faith Today*, (July/August, 1995): 15.

25 Mark Williams, *Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide and Self-Harm* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), xi.

26 Diane Komp, “Life Wish” *Christianity Today*, (March 3, 1997): 20.

The example of The Netherlands is often pointed to as an example in this debate. Social historian Ian Gentles suggests that, "Within a decade [The Netherlands] has witnessed a rapid progression from voluntary euthanasia to involuntary euthanasia affecting several hundred people a year."²⁷ Yet, despite these very real concerns, it is easy to feel sympathy toward those who wish to "die with dignity." How many people have not wished, even prayed, that the pain of a terminally ill patient be shortened to alleviate their suffering!

hospice care is a positive response to the cry for euthanasia in our day.

Dr. Cicily Saunders, a devout Christian, observed how poorly the medical profession handled death and was determined to find a better way to minister to the dying. She eventually founded St. Christopher's Hospice (London, England), and out of that sprang the worldwide hospice movement. Hospice is dedicated to comforting the dying and alleviating suffering as much as possible.

Dr. Saunders once wrote, "Suffering

In responding to the tragedy of suicide, regardless of the circumstance, the challenge for God's people is to move beyond simply defining ethical positions. The primary challenge is to respond in grace and truth.

The Church's response must begin at a very fundamental level. Sue Rodriguez, who fought all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada for the right to end her life, asked the poignant question; "Whose life is it anyways?" From a Biblical perspective, one must agree with Aquinas that life is a gift from God and therefore it is He alone who has the right to take it.

Created by God, we are stewards not owners of life. It is God's gift, and its end is to be determined by His sovereignty: "There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life" (Deuteronomy 32:39).

Because life comes as a gift from God, each life has God-given value. This "sanctity of life," as it is sometimes called, is imbedded in the law given to Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). This Scripture is more than a prohibition on taking an innocent life; it reveals the reason for life's intrinsic value—we are a people created in the image of God. This means that life holds inherent value at every stage. This is vastly different from the fluctuating self-esteem that many people experience based on productivity, abilities or appearance.

With this as a foundation, we must move then to develop a compassionate theology for the terminally ill. For those in the final stages before death,

is only intolerable when nobody cares. One continually sees that faith in God and His care is made infinitely easier by faith in someone who has shown kindness and sympathy."²⁸ If Christians want to be heard in the debate over physician-assisted suicide, we must do more than offer ethical arguments—we must show how love can overcome the pain and fears of dying. Ninety-five percent of hospice workers are volunteers.²⁹ Christians, in particular, need to be at the vanguard of this movement.

Conclusion

In responding to the tragedy of suicide, regardless of the circumstance, the challenge for God's people is to move beyond simply defining ethical positions. The primary challenge is to respond in grace and truth—in truth, by holding firmly to the value and sanctity of each human life; in grace, by holding out hope, support and understanding to those contemplating this ultimate act of self-destruction and to their families. To balance these is to develop a working theology of suicide and the Church. ☹

Bibliography

Augustine. *The City of God*. J. M. Dent & Sons.

Brand, Paul and Yancey, Philip. *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

Carr, G. Lloyd and Carr, Gwendolyn C. *The Fierce Goodbye: Hope in the Wake of Suicide*. Inter Varsity Press, 1990.

Grollman, Earl A. *Suicide: Prevention, Intervention, Postvention*. Beacon Press, 1971.

Komp, Diane "Life Wish." *Christianity Today* (March 3, 1997): 20–21.

Maris, Ronald W. *Pathways to Suicide: A Survey of Self-Destructive Behaviors*. John Hopkins University Press, 1981.

O'Leary, Denyse. "Euthanasia in Canada: Teetering on the edge of Legalization." *Faith Today* (July/August 1995): 15-19.

O'Leary, Denyse. "Palliative Care and Respite Care: Answers to Euthanasia?" *Faith Today* (July/August 1995): 24–26.

Quinnett, Paul G. *Suicide, The Forever Decision*. Continuum, 1989.

Schork, R. J. "Suicide." *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. McGraw-Hill, 1967.

Stimming, Mary T. "Grace in the Face of Suicide." *The Christian Century* (March 8, 2000): 272–274.

Williams, Mark. *Cry of Pain: Understanding Suicide and Self-Harm*. Penguin Books, 1997.

27 Denyse O'Leary, "Teetering on the Edge of Legalization" *Faith Today*, (July/August, 1995): 15.

28 Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 257.

29 Denyse O'Leary, "Palliative Care and Respite Care: Answers to Euthanasia?" *Faith Today*, (July/August, 1995): 25.

A Proper Understanding of Water Baptism at the Moment of Application

Darryl Klassen

Darryl Klassen is Senior Pastor of Kleefeld EMC in Kleefeld, Manitoba.

Baptism is an ancient symbol going back more than two thousand years. It was used by Jews as a way of inducting Gentiles into their faith long before Christians used it as a rite for their purposes.

There is nothing else like it in our culture and society today, whereby a large audience comes together to watch individuals receive this application of water. Graduation ceremonies pale in comparison but offer some kind of parallel between initiation into a faith at an age of accountability and the transition from student to graduate. Truly, there is nothing in our contemporary setting that comes anywhere close to resembling the centuries old practice of baptism.

For this reason those who are baptized into the Christian faith today are perhaps unaware of the full implication of receiving water baptism. Over time symbols become more ritual and frivolous, losing their meaning. Most young people who choose to be baptized can state very simply that the reason they wish to be baptized is to show “the world” that they are Christians. Granted, they may not need to have a theological understanding and this simple confession is certainly sufficient. However, something is lost in our present teaching of baptism so that the power and meaning of this symbol does not carry the gravity it should.

Let me ask you this: What is the significance of the symbol of water baptism for the believer at the time of its application? When friends and family gather together with the community of faith to observe a person

being immersed in water, or having the water poured over him or her like a waterfall of grace, what is really happening?

Identification with Christ’s own baptism

What preachers occasionally tell their audiences at a baptism ceremony is that we baptize our new converts because Jesus himself was baptized. We are told that if we wish to follow Jesus we must willingly accept this baptism, imitating the example of Jesus on the day he was baptized by John. What is often poorly explained is why Jesus was baptized when he was sinless and in no need of a baptism of repentance. How is Jesus’ example important for our understanding of baptism?

What Jesus received was John the Baptist’s baptism, a baptism of repentance. John went about the Judean countryside opening up the way for the Lord by preparing people to receive the Messiah. When Jesus arrives on the scene of baptism, John resisted the Lord’s request to be baptized. Jay Adams wrote, “The unwillingness of John to baptize Jesus indicates that he considered it an improper thing that Jesus should be classed with others who came to his baptism.”¹ Yet John changed his mind when Jesus replied, “It must be done, because we must do everything that is right” (Matthew 3:15, NLT). As Deuteronomy 6:25 tells us that which is “right” involves obedience to the law, Christ submitted to the law in order to exemplify his obedience to Old Testament law.

It was a public affirmation of what was right as Jesus perceived it. For

What preachers occasionally tell their audiences at a baptism ceremony is that we baptize our new converts because Jesus himself was baptized. What is often poorly explained is why Jesus was baptized when he was sinless and in no need of a baptism of repentance.

people to see this in him was extremely significant. “That baptism of Jesus by John is seen in a fresh light when we view it as a ‘symbolical’ act, not in our own weakened sense of the adjective but with all the vivid significance of belonging to prophetic symbolism of the Old Testament. The very fact that Jesus, though without personal consciousness of wrongdoing, yet submitted to ‘a baptism of repentance’ indicates that to him in some way the outward act was intensely significant.”²

It was certainly significant for it paved the way for his followers to enter into his program for life. Jesus had to be baptized to show how believers could participate in his death and resurrection, as Oscar Cullman pointed out, “Individual participation in the death and resurrection of Christ in Baptism is possible only after Christ has completed his general Baptism; and this is the reason why he himself was baptized by John, and why those received into the church today are baptized.”³

Jesus fulfilled what was right according to the Old Testament by submitting to baptism, but that was not his only purpose in receiving baptism. Inherent in this act was his desire to identify with humankind and our sinfulness, thus validating his quest to die for us. Consequently, his

1 Jay Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), 16.

2 W. F. Flemington, *New Testament Doctrine of Baptism* (London: S. P. C. K., 1953), 120.

3 Oscar Cullman, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), 22.

identification with us encourages us to identify with him.

“Even as Jesus identified himself with humanity at his baptism, so at baptism his followers identify themselves with him, his ministry, and his cross. One is baptized because Christ was, with all that means.”⁴ We see already the understanding that our baptism is much more than a water rite, but a wholesale “immersion” into Jesus’ life, his death on the cross, and the all-encompassing identification with his person.

Why water baptism to dramatize this decision? Oscar Brooks explains that “the early Christians could share this. As Jesus was baptized as a sign of his commitment to the will of God so they too were baptized as a sign of their commitment to Jesus Christ—in his name. Because Jesus was baptized, the early Christians were baptized and required baptism of other new converts.”⁵

Water was as common as bread as the basic elements of life. One could hardly forget their commitment to Christ every time they took a sip of water. Water would remind them of Christ’s obedience and faithfulness and inspire them to follow after him. Through water and especially water baptism, we identify with Jesus who came to fulfill what was right in the sight of God.

Into the name of Jesus

Not only is water baptism identification with Christ’s baptism, the early Church extended that identification by baptizing converts in the name of, or into the name of Jesus. Peter told the crowd at Pentecost, “Each one of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Since there were other baptisms prior to Christian baptism, baptism into Christ identified a specific claim.

That claim included a submission on the part of the baptized to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over his or her life. The baptized person belonged to Jesus, as Everett Flemington noted: “In accordance with Old Testament usage, the ‘name’ was a token of ownership. To be baptized ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’ signified that the convert belonged

to Jesus Christ and owed an absolute allegiance to him.”⁶ This is a forgotten element today, with the present anti-authoritarian milieu of contemporary society. To belong to a person and give allegiance to someone is foreign to post-modern ears, but an essential element of being baptized into Christ.

G. R. Beasley-Murray echoed Flemington’s thoughts: “Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, whatever else it came to imply, was in the earliest time a baptism ‘for the sake of’ the Lord Jesus and therefore in submission to Him as Lord and King.”⁷ If the baptized believer becomes the Lord’s own possession and submits to his

If the baptized believer becomes the Lord’s own possession and submits to his sovereignty over their lives, it changes the gravity of the mere sprinkling of water and a few confessional words. These words cannot be confessed lightly, or with an attitude that this is a passage to adulthood, as some are prone to do. This is a life-changing confession and promise to live under the Christ’s rule.

sovereignty over their lives, it changes the gravity of the mere sprinkling of water and a few confessional words. These words cannot be confessed lightly, or with an attitude that this is a passage to adulthood, as some are prone to do. This is a life-changing confession and promise to live under the Christ’s rule.

Baptism cannot be taken lightly or as a simple symbol. There is a process

involved, leading to a point of decision, and followed by a sincere and humble reception of Christ’s sign. This is how Brooks approached the question, “What then did it mean to be baptized ‘in the name of Jesus Christ?’ It meant that the individual had heard the proclamation of the good news that salvation was present. He carefully, with awe and reverence, made a calculated decision in favor of the message. He willingly accepted the rite of baptism because it dramatized that he, the convert, was entering a new relationship with Christ based on Christ’s status as the bringer of the new era and his essential reputation as verified by God.”⁸

It was an intimate association with Christ, taking his name, which also implied taking his personality. For a name is more than a reference to a person but an indispensable part of one’s personality. One takes on the reputation of the name that person is baptized into, thus increasing the responsibility associated with that name—in this case, Christ’s.⁹ To be baptized in the name of Christ is to receive that name as a bearer of that name.¹⁰

After all, it is the name of Christ one calls upon for salvation. At the time of baptism the person being baptized claims the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and confesses that he is Lord and Saviour. It is this confession of relationship with the crucified, risen Christ that is essential for Christian baptism and gives decisive significance to the act.¹¹

An outward symbol of an inward reality

The symbol of water baptism is beginning to take on the weight of importance the deeper its meaning is explored. So much meaning is found in Christ’s example and in how his

4 Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 180.

5 Oscar S. Brooks, *The Drama of Decision: Baptism in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 65.

6 Flemington, 45.

7 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Great Britain: The Paternoster Press, 1962), 101.

8 Brooks, 65.

9 Brooks, 64.

10 Ferguson, 181

11 Beasley-Murray, 120.

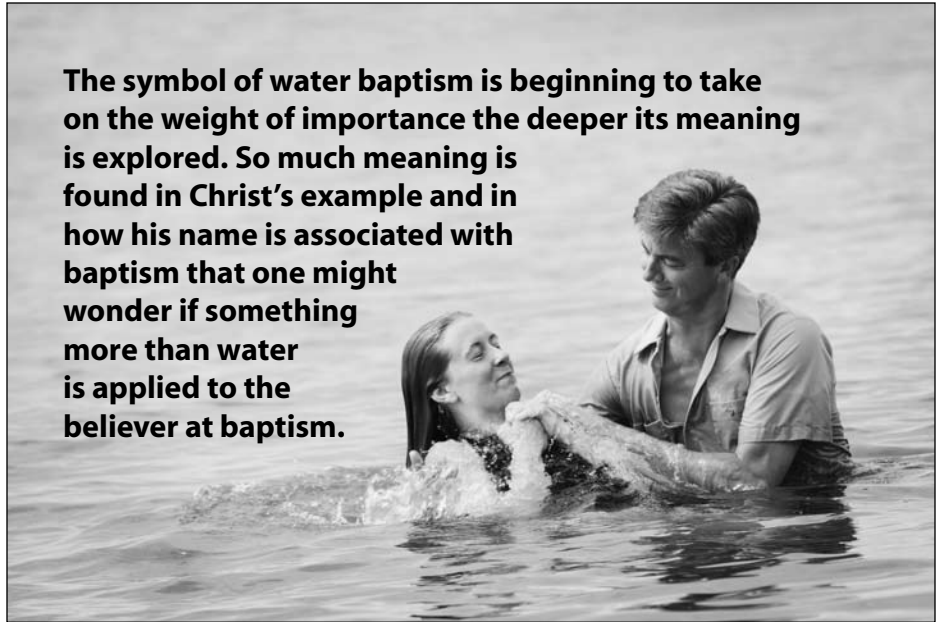
name is associated with baptism that one might wonder if something more than water is applied to the believer at baptism.

Paul, while defending himself following his arrest in Jerusalem, spoke of how Ananias told him to “Get up and be baptized, and have your sins washed away” (Acts 22:16). The washing away of sins through baptism is found here and there in the New Testament and gives the impression that this water does something to us. We must be careful though, to remember that water baptism is an outward symbol of an inward reality.

It is a powerful symbol to which some would attach great meaning. Laurence Stookey wrote, “Nothing in creation has the power to remind us so fully of the work of our Lord as the common substance of water. This he gives us at baptism as a token of his saving grace, so that from the time of our initiation onward we may be reminded of all he has done for us, so that we may see ourselves as a people united to him and to one another in him.”¹² But it is just that, a reminder and not a sacrament or some kind of magical rite. Adams separates the baptism of water from being baptized into Christ with the implication that the benefits that result from being baptized into Christ cannot be produced by water.¹³

From the Anabaptist perspective there is an even greater emphasis to stress the outward “symbolic” nature of water baptism. The “washing” that occurs is an internal washing that Christ does to the believer through faith. Arthur Gish makes this clear as he comments on the very few passages of Scripture that speak of washing: “In a few places baptism is seen as a cleansing and washing (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11), but there is not much emphasis on this and no hint of a magical washing away of sin in a self-

The symbol of water baptism is beginning to take on the weight of importance the deeper its meaning is explored. So much meaning is found in Christ’s example and in how his name is associated with baptism that one might wonder if something more than water is applied to the believer at baptism.



operative way. There is no teaching that water actually washes away sin. That can only be done by God as we respond in faith. Water can be a symbol of a deeper washing that has already taken place and is continuing to take place in our lives (1 Pet. 3:21).¹⁴

How can one appeal to God from a clean conscience through baptism if baptism is a washing away of sin? The only way this is possible is if Christ has made us clean through our faith in him. We are baptized on the basis of this truth and reflect what has already happened in a public manner.

The inward reality of baptism is something that has taken place prior to the event of baptism, making baptism more the symbol of what has happened in our lives. “There is no magical power in the water nor merit in the act itself, for the value comes not from the water but from the intention with which the act is performed.”¹⁵ That does not mean that the metaphor of washing is not a valid one. Ferguson continues, “Water itself does not touch sins, but washing in water perfectly symbolizes what takes place when the command

on which forgiveness is conditioned is obeyed.”¹⁶ Baptism is a firm expression of one’s decision to live a life honouring to Christ in a vividly portrayed action within time and space.¹⁷

To swing too far to the other side of symbolism is to enter into a sacramentalist view which does see the washing of baptism as a real washing. We then face the difficulty of an interpretation which reads a saving element into the act of baptism. Consequently there is the pressure to baptize children younger and younger. Gish responded to this problem, “To argue that children should be baptized when they are young and still willing, with the fear that they might change their minds when they are older, is both manipulative and an acceptance of sacramentalism, the idea that baptism itself will do something for the person and make the person more likely to accept the faith.”¹⁸

Beasley-Murray rightly summarizes the position of believer’s baptism advocates who see baptism as a symbolic attestation of a death and resurrection that have already been experienced. Baptism’s chief purpose is the confession and joy of obeying Christ’s command to be baptized.¹⁹

Beasley-Murray further suggests that a connection between baptism and Christ’s death can be envisaged from Paul’s words in Romans 6:4–6 in three ways. Some say that in baptism, the believer suffers a death

12 Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 16.

13 Adams, 27–28.

14 Arthur G. Gish, *Living in Christian Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 194.

15 Ferguson, 184.

16 Ferguson, 185.

17 Brooks, 31.

18 Gish, 200.

19 Beasley-Murray, 130.

and resurrection like Christ's, death to sin, and resurrection to a new life. Others will oppose this interpretation, saying that the death and resurrection of the baptized person is the death and resurrection of Christ on the cross. Then, a third view stresses the dying to sinful passions and behaviour as the baptized person renounces the self and rises to a new life through the Spirit's work. Beasley-Murray, in response, sees truth in all three.²⁰

It remains that baptism is a symbol only of the realities these three views try to express. Water baptism,

Baptism signals to the public sphere that the believer is beginning a new life founded in Christ. While baptism itself is a one-time event, our participation in Christ's death and resurrection is a process.

particularly in the mode known as immersion, portrays this burial with Christ and the rising to new life and reminds us of this very important identification with Christ.

Symbolizes discipleship following conversion

Water baptism symbolizes a number of realities. The identification with Christ and the taking of his name represent ongoing truths for the believer who commits herself or himself to following Jesus. Baptism is a "package" of truths that have been received prior to one's baptism and are confessed to be already at work in the believer. These include:

Repentance and forgiveness: Again, Peter told the crowd, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God (repentance), and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). At Pentecost it would appear that repentance and baptism are simultaneous events. For the purposes of that day they probably were. Currently, few people are baptized immediately upon receiving Christ. It has become a process of hearing the good news, understanding and believing the message, turning

from sin to live for Christ, and eventually being baptized. Therefore, we are more apt to say, "Baptism is a result of repentance and an expression of that repentance."²¹

Repentance occurs well before the baptism event and a life of discipleship has already begun in the believer. We would then say, "Repentance is the inward turning, and baptism is the outward turning, which is followed by the new life of walking in the opposite direction. Baptism is the act that expresses the rejection of sin and the turning to follow God."²²

With repentance done in a pure and sincere heart comes God's forgiveness of sins. This too is symbolized in the water baptism after the fact, "The walking in God's way that follows on repentance and baptism is made possible because baptism brings forgiveness of sins. Or, better stated, baptism is the appointed time at which God pronounces forgiveness. Faith takes away the love of sin, repentance takes away the practice of sin, and baptism takes away the guilt of sin."²³ If Ferguson is taken literally here, it is not certain that everyone experiences the removal of guilt at baptism. But in a figurative sense baptism symbolizes the truth that there is no more guilt.

Reception of the Holy Spirit: Part of the package "symbolized" in water baptism is the reception of the Spirit. Jesus promised the Spirit to anyone who believed in him (John 7:38-39), and we do not get the sense that anything more was needed but faith to receive the Spirit. Therefore, at the time of conversion the new believer receives the Spirit which is later symbolized by water baptism. This is a natural association according to Beasley-Murray: "That the gift (of the Holy Spirit) should

be associated with baptism is to be expected. For baptism in the name of the Messiah Jesus related the believer to the Lord of the Kingdom, who had received the Spirit from the Father that He might pour forth upon His people and so fulfill the promise given through the prophets..."²⁴

The symbol of receiving the Spirit through baptism finds a parallel in the imagery of the Old Testament where anointing with oil also symbolized receiving the Spirit.²⁵ The "pouring out" represents a reality of the Spirit's presence in the life of the believer.

The beginning of the new life: Baptism signals to the public sphere that the believer is beginning a new life founded in Christ. While baptism itself is a one-time event, our participation in Christ's death and resurrection is a process. Martin Luther emphasized baptism as a lifelong process of putting to death the old person and the coming to life of the new. He continued to teach that the Christian life is an ongoing daily baptism.²⁶

It follows that the new life will be one of obedience to Jesus and baptism is the means through which the believer commits himself or herself to this life of obedience.²⁷ Obedience cannot be omitted from the process; it is a vital part of true discipleship one commits to at the time of baptism.

A future hope: Water baptism points to the future and symbolizes the reception of God's promise when he will bring all things to a close. What God has done in creating this world, in the coming of Christ, and the establishment of his Church by the power of the Spirit, works together for his divine purpose which will be revealed at the end of time.²⁸ In

20 Beasley-Murray, 131-132.

21 Ferguson, 182.

22 Ferguson, 182.

23 Ferguson, 183.

24 Beasley-Murray, 104.

25 Gish, 196.

26 Michael Root & Risto Saarinen, eds., *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 21.

27 Paul M. Lederach, *A Third Way* (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1980), 80.

28 Stookey, 17.

a personal way, baptism reminds us of the final triumph Christ will have over our sin and death. Paul Lederach calls this the “final baptism” when the believer enters into the next life that God has prepared for all believers.²⁹

Identifies the believer with the Church

While baptism is something a mature person decides to do on their own, it is by no means a private matter. The decision belongs to the individual but the Church as a body participates in the baptism. It is a corporate symbol with far-reaching implications.

Those who say that faith is a private matter have not understood the corporate nature of the community of faith. In the early Church there was a sense of belonging to the community of faith and sharing in its life (Acts 2:41; 2:43–47). Indeed, the distribution of specific gifts to individuals encouraged the banding together of believers to realize the full potential of those gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). Baptism is the opportunity to pledge oneself to that body and to use one’s gifts for the furtherance of the kingdom.

The Church, in turn, welcomes the newly baptized person as one of their own: “At water baptism the believer announces publicly a desire to fellowship with the church. As the believer acknowledged publicly that he was a brother or sister in Christ, the congregation also publicly acknowledged the new believer as one of them.”³⁰ To profess faith in Christ is to be united with him, and if we are united with him then we are united with his body, the Church.³¹

In a manner of speaking, the act of receiving water baptism is a prayer. Prayer is not words alone but something that we can express in action. We confess our faith in Jesus

Christ through baptism and in so doing make it our public confession of our own sinfulness and need for Jesus, our Saviour. Confession is a prayer, and pledging to be part of a community of faith is also a prayer. Thus baptism is an act of prayer.³²

Baptism speaks to the Church and tells her she is alive with growth and vitality. Water baptism also speaks to the world. As Ferguson puts it, “Baptism serves as the act of initiation into the Church...Not only does the church need something to identify its members, but people need something they can look back on and say, ‘At that time I became a Christian, a member

Baptism, as on the day of Pentecost, preaches to unbelievers that Christ is at work in their friends’ lives. By taking on the symbol of baptism then, the believer commits herself or himself to continuing this witness with their speech and conduct.

of the church.’ God has designated something as the decisive act that only the truly converted will do. Baptism is the line between the church and the world.”³³

The testimony of water baptism tells the world that this individual is immersed in the person of Christ, his death and resurrection, and submission to the work of the Holy Spirit.³⁴

Testimony becomes witness in the light of this definition. Baptism, as on the day of Pentecost, preaches to unbelievers that Christ is at work in their friends’ lives. By taking on the symbol of baptism then, the believer commits herself or himself

to continuing this witness with their speech and conduct. Gish wrote, “Baptism is not only a symbol of initiation into the new community but commissioning the person to be a witness. Baptism symbolizes the commitment to make discipleship one’s main vocation in life.”³⁵

Is water baptism more than a symbol?

With such rich truths permeating the whole of water baptism one has to wonder whether there is more to the act than mere symbol. Does baptism only represent the reality of what Christ is doing in the believer? Is there more to the symbol than a simple application of water?

Several writers suggest that “mere symbol” is not adequate to describe this event. On Romans 6:1–14, David Smith wrote, “While Paul is obviously referring to the external rite of baptism (as the believer is immersed in water, he is ‘buried’ with the Lord, and when he comes up out of the water, he ‘rises’ with the Lord), it would be a serious error to think of baptism, therefore, as ‘merely symbolic.’ For Paul, what baptism symbolizes really occurs, and it occurs through the ordinance of baptism.”³⁶

One might wonder how far Smith takes “really occurs” in the literal sense. We are “united” with Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism, but in a highly symbolic sense. No one actually feels the cold air and damp walls of the tomb. At the same time, baptism indicates the spiritual reality that we are joined to Christ in death to sin and life in righteousness.

Cullmann, too, sees the water as carrying more meaning than mere representation, though he adds faith to the equation. Cullmann wrote “the act of baptism as such involves a real, and not a merely symbolic, event, although its further efficacy is wholly bound up with the subsequent faith of the person baptized and stands or falls with it.”³⁷ The power of the symbol of baptism lies in the faith of the person being baptized in this perspective. Absence of faith in the ongoing discipleship of this person negates the effectiveness of the symbol.

To retreat too far without considering that the symbol is itself part of a fantastic spiritual reality is limiting. Water is trivial, baptism

29 Lederach, 83.

30 Lederach, 86.

31 Stookey, 26.

32 Beasley-Murray, 101.

33 Ferguson, 183.

34 David L. Smith, *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: A BridgePoint Book, 1996), 379.

35 Gish, 196.

36 Smith, 274.

37 Cullmann, 37.

is legalistic, and tradition is empty without reflecting on the faith of the person involved and the celebration of the Church as it brings home one more person for Jesus. Something marvelous is happening here that goes beyond symbol, while at the same time is still representative of what Christ does in us.

Ferguson said it well: "Baptism may be described as an act of dynamic symbolism, a symbol that partakes of the reality symbolized...baptism may be understood as a prophetic sign or

What happens when the water hits the brow, or when the body plunges into the tank or stream? Nothing! And everything!

symbol."³⁸ Baptism is not more than a symbol; however, baptism is dynamic symbolism as we actively enter into the salvation event on the Cross.

Conclusion

It is difficult for pastors today to express the totality of the meaning of baptism in a single Sunday service. As the candidates for baptism take membership classes, catechism, or Christian introduction courses, they reap the benefit of having most of this doctrine taught to them. It may be that the Church as a whole would benefit from having the pastor unpack the truth of baptism and the salvation event more than once a year. Or some further education on the richness of Christian symbols could be taught in a Christian Education hour.

Whatever course of action is taken one truth remains: We must comprehend the meaning of the rituals we perform if we are to continue them in faith and pass them on to succeeding generations.

What happens when the water hits the brow, or when the body plunges into the tank or stream? Nothing! And everything! It is an exciting occurrence whereby a believer is joined with Christ and other believers in the mystic union of the body that will be transformed into the glorious heavenly throng. Water baptism is a beautiful thing. ☉

38 Ferguson, 191.

Bibliography

Adams, Jay. *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975.

Armour, Rollin Stely. *Anabaptism Baptism*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1966.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. *Baptism in the New Testament*. Great Britain: The Paternoster Press, 1962.

Brooks, Oscar S. *The Drama of Decision: Baptism in the New Testament*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.

Campbell, Maura. "Symbol and Reality: Water, Life, Death and Christian Baptism." *Dialogue and Alliance* (Vol. 4, no. 1, Spring 1990): 48–60.

Cullmann, Oscar. *Baptism in the New Testament*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964.

Dunn, James D. G. *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*. London: SCM Press, 1977.

Ferguson, William Everett. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.

Flemington, W. F. *New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*. London: S. P. C. K., 1953.

Gilmore, A., ed. *Christian Baptism*, Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959.

Gish, Arthur G. *Living in Christian Community*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1979.

Jost, Lynn. "Mennonite Brethren Theology of Baptism." *Direction* (33.01 2004): 21–32.

Lederach, Paul M. *A Third Way*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980.

McIntyre, Luther B. "Baptism and Forgiveness in Acts 2:38." *Bibliotheca sacra* 153 (January–March 1996): 53–62.

Root, Michael, and Risto Saarinen, eds. *Baptism and Unity in the Church*. Grand

Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

Smith, David L. *All God's People: A Theology of the Church*. Wheaton, Illinois: A BridgePoint Book, 1996.

Stookey, Laurence Hull. *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1982.

Wagner, Johannes, ed. *Adult Baptism and the Catechumenate*. New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1967.

White, R. E. O. *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960.



Theodidaktos requires new submissions!

Theodidaktos: Journal for EMC theology and education invites essays, book reviews, and sermons for consideration within its second issue. There is no payment.

Editor Darryl Klassen, senior pastor at Kleefeld EMC, can be contacted at 204-377-4773, kemc@mts.net, or Box 129, Kleefeld, MB ROA 0V0. Essay length is a maximum of 3,500 words.

The Journal is a way to see EMC discussion and education in print. The payment is to see EMCers listening to Scripture and to each other. *Theodidaktos* means *taught by God*.

The proposed publication date is mid-winter, and the project is under the authority of the Board of Church Ministries.

A Critique of the Emerging Church

Michael C. Zwaagstra

Michael Zwaagstra is a member of Evangelical Fellowship Church (EMC) in Steinbach, Manitoba.

Across North America and around the world, the Emerging Church movement is having a substantial impact on Christian churches. What makes this movement so far-reaching is the fact that it is not limited to just one or two Christian denominations. In fact, leaders and sympathisers of the Emerging Church movement are found in almost every major Christian denomination whether they are Catholic or Protestant, conservative or liberal, Baptist or Mennonite, charismatic or non-charismatic. Whatever else can be said about this movement, it is clearly transdenominational in scope.

While there are a number of Emerging Church leaders who have risen to prominence, Brian D. McLaren has generally been recognised as the movement's primary spokesman and apologist. McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland and has published a number of books in which he maps out his vision for the theology of the Emerging Church.

In order to properly evaluate this movement, it is important to have a basic understanding of the postmodern assumptions made by Emerging Church leaders and what these assumptions mean for Christian theology as understood by the Emerging Church.

Examining Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a philosophy that says that it is impossible for us to step outside of our cultural

Along with a rejection of objective truth, postmodernists exhibit incredulity towards metanarratives, stories that supersede all others.

and language backgrounds and assumptions. As a result, we cannot make objective truth statements about reality. Postmodernists reject the belief that truth is that which corresponds to reality. They say, instead, that we construct our own understanding of the world around us which, for us, is true. In other words, postmodernists have moved from an objectivist to a constructionist understanding of knowledge.¹

Along with a rejection of objective truth, postmodernists exhibit incredulity towards metanarratives, stories that supersede all others.² Since our language and statements about the world do not correspond with reality, it follows that while the telling stories and constructing narratives is encouraged, metanarratives are distrusted.

Postmodernists also argue that the main point of reading a text is not to discern the author's original intent, since that is impossible. Rather, we construct our own understanding of what the text is speaking to us. They prefer to deconstruct writings until they come up with a meaning that has little, if anything, to do with what the original author intended. For postmodernists, this is an important

symbol of the abandonment of the logocentric quest for meaning.³

It should come as little surprise to discover that the pre-eminent post-modern philosophers are, or were, atheists. Michael Foucault (1926–1984), Jacques Derrida (1930–), and Richard Rorty (1931–) all reject the existence of God and conclude that there is no universal meaning to our lives on earth. Following the postmodernist rejection of metanarratives, they see our existence as having no ultimate purpose beyond what we choose for ourselves. Foucault's life is particularly tragic because his promiscuous homosexual lifestyle resulted in his contracting AIDS and dying at a relatively young age.⁴

Postmodernism and the Biblical Worldview

Postmodernism has little in common with the Biblical worldview. In fact, the Bible begins with the ultimate metanarrative in the first chapter of Genesis—the creation of the universe. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) is a truth statement that claims to explain the origin of the entire universe. If the God of the Bible actually exists, then he must exist regardless of statements made about him by humans. Narratives that assert the universe is self-caused and/or uncreated cannot be true if the Genesis creation account is accurate.

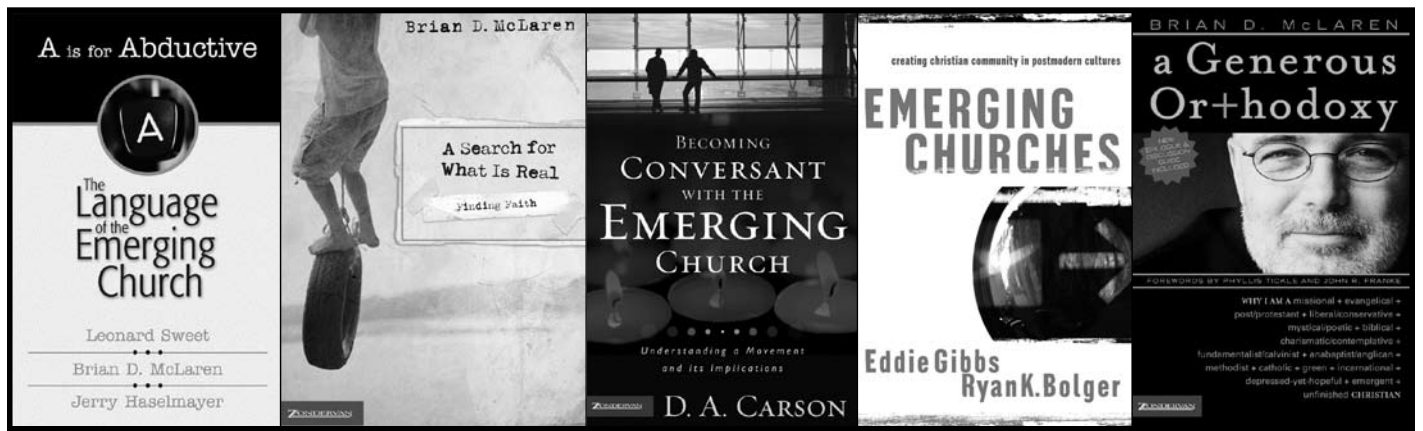
The Bible also assumes the validity of the correspondence theory of truth. In Deuteronomy 18:20–22, the Israelites are warned about the presence of false prophets and told that they can be identified as such when they make predictions that fail to come to pass. "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the

1 Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 40–41.

2 Steiner Kvale, "Themes of Postmodernity," in *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, Walter T. Anderson, ed., (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 20.

3 Grenz, op. cit. pp. 147–150.

4 Grenz, op. cit. pp. 125–126.



word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.⁵ The Israelites were not told to deconstruct the prophet's message so that they could decide what parts of his speech were true to them. Instead they were told to test the validity of a prophet by the extent to which his prophecies corresponded with reality.

Emerging Church leaders believe that Christianity is under the sway of modernism and that significant changes need to be made in order to make our faith relevant to those in a post-modern world.

A number of evangelical scholars have written strongly worded critiques of post-modern philosophy and have pointed out how the tenets of postmodernism contradict the Biblical worldview.⁶ Some evangelical scholars, rather than challenging postmodernism, prefer to integrate the basic tenets of postmodernism within a Christian worldview.⁷ This is the option chosen by Emerging Church leaders. As will become evident, post-modern philosophy has so infused the thinking of Emerging Church leaders that it undermines the soundness of their entire theological framework.

Adopting Postmodernism

Emerging church leaders are quite

open about the fact that they have chosen to embrace the basic tenets of postmodernism. They assert that Christianity has been brainwashed by Enlightenment modernism and that there is no such thing as objectivity.⁸

Emerging church leaders reject belief in objective truth and argue that Christians need to find ways of communicating the gospel that do not involve defending its objective validity. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger go so far as to say that Emerging Christians do not feel a need to stand up and fight for truth since good ethics are more important than sound doctrine.⁹

Emerging Church leaders believe that Christianity is under the sway of modernism and that significant changes need to be made in order to make our faith relevant to those in a post-modern world. One of the first things that need to go, according to

Emerging Church leaders, is systematic theology. Since systematic theology is highly structured and set up according to foundationalist¹⁰ assumptions, it needs to be replaced with a more holistic method of theological study such as systemic or systems theology.¹¹ Some theologians have begun this process of writing theology textbooks that are nonfoundationalist in methodology.¹² The theologically disturbing results of this methodology will become apparent later in this analysis.

Two things need to be said in response to the position of Emerging Church leaders on this issue. First of all, it is highly misleading to claim that evangelical churches are under the sway of modernism since modernism, when taken to its logical conclusion, asserts naturalism and rejects anything supernatural. While churches may have adopted elements

5 Deuteronomy 18:22 (ESV).

6 Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).; Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth: Responding to Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason, and the New Postmodern Diversity*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).

7 Grenz, op. cit.; Philip D. Kenneson. "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth and It's a Good Thing Too," in *Christian Apologetics and the Postmodern World*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

8 Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer. "A" is for Abductive: *The Language of the Emerging Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 163.

9 Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005), p. 124.

10 The assumption that some beliefs are more properly basic than others. One begins with premises that are more certain and uses these as building blocks to lead to additional conclusions. Because systematic theology is highly structured and uses scripture passages in an inductive manner, it is an example of foundationalism.

11 Leonard Sweet, et. al. op. cit., pp. 272-278.

12 John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

of modernism, such as rationalism, it is hardly fair to say that evangelical churches are modernistic. Any church that affirms the miraculous elements of the Bible cannot, by definition, be described as fully modernist.¹³

Second, it is deeply concerning to see Emerging Church leaders advocate exchanging one set of non-Christian philosophical assumptions (modernism) for a different set of non-Christian philosophical assumptions (postmodernism). Rather than becoming caught up in the debate over whether modernism or postmodernism is friendlier to the Christian faith, evangelical leaders need to stand up and defend the worldview presented in the Bible.

The Emerging Church and Biblical Authority

While Emerging Church leaders claim to have a high view of biblical inspiration, their definitions of inspiration and their poor handling of biblical texts indicate otherwise. Rob Bell is pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, and the main speaker on the popular NOOMA video series. His definition of biblical inspiration serves to undermine, rather than uphold, the authority of scripture.

“The Bible is a collection of stories that teach us about what it looks like when God is at work through actual people. The Bible has the authority it does only because it contains stories about people interacting with the God who has all authority.”¹⁴

This quote is typical of how weak a view of biblical inspiration and

authority Emerging Church leaders generally have. While the Bible contains narrative, it is much more than just that. The Bible has authority because it is “God-breathed”¹⁵ not simply because it contains stories about people interacting with God.

By misrepresenting historical facts, Bell gives the impression that the books of the Bible became canonical because they were chosen by early church councils. In reality, early church fathers recognized these books as canonical because they already had canonical authority. Church councils merely confirmed what was already acknowledged by virtually all Christian leaders.

Brian McLaren also undermines biblical authority by likening it to a “family story” that needs to be liberated from the modern focus on answers and factual information. According to McLaren, the church, rather than the Bible, is to be looked at as the foundation of truth.¹⁶ In essence, McLaren’s position on biblical authority is closer to the Roman Catholic position than the Protestant position. Unfortunately, he is not the only Emerging Church leader to undermine the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.

By engaging in historical revisionism at its worst, Rob Bell also gives his tacit endorsement to

the Roman Catholic position on the authority of scripture.

“But it wasn’t until the 300s that what we know as the sixty-six books of the Bible were actually agreed upon as the ‘Bible.’ This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true.¹⁷

This is fundamentally incorrect and it is evident that Bell is not a church historian. The 39 books of the Old Testament had been agreed upon long before Jesus was born. They were never in dispute after the time of Jesus. As for the 27 books of the New Testament, early Christian leaders had recognised these books as canonical long before the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. All the Nicaean council did was confirm the 27 books that had already been recognized as canonical by Christian leaders. These books were widely quoted and acknowledged as Scripture by early church fathers long before 300 A.D.¹⁸

By misrepresenting historical facts, Bell gives the impression that the books of the Bible became canonical because they were chosen by early church councils. In reality, early church fathers recognized these books as canonical because they already had canonical authority. Church councils merely confirmed what was already acknowledged by virtually all Christian leaders. There is a crucial distinction between these two positions and Emerging Church leaders have clearly placed themselves in opposition to *sola scriptura*.

While Emerging Church leaders attempt to position themselves above labels such as conservative or liberal, they invariably come down on the side of theological liberalism when they are forced to state their position. Emerging Church leaders endorse belief in the theory of evolution and have harsh words for those who attempt to defend the Genesis account as literally true.¹⁹ Brian McLaren also praises liberals for having “blazed the trail in seeking to treat homosexual and transgender persons with compassion.”²⁰

13 Jim Leffel, “Our Old Challenge: Modernism,” in *The Death of Truth*, Dennis McCallum, ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), pp. 19–30.

14 Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 65.

15 2 Timothy 3:16.

16 Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 46–53.

17 Rob Bell, op. cit., p. 67.

18 Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), pp. 101–112.

19 Chuck Smith jr and Matt Whitlock, *Frequently Avoided Questions: An uncensored dialogue on faith*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), pp. 171–184.; Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp. 32–38.

20 Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 138.

Nowhere in his writings does McLaren affirm the position that sexual relations are restricted to those in heterosexual marriages. McLaren and other Emerging Church leaders also unequivocally reject complementarianism²¹ without any attempt to mount a scriptural case for their position.²² Far from standing above the fray of the debate between theological conservatives and liberals, Emerging Church leaders are in the midst of the battle and are consistently on the liberal side on the major issues. It is inaccurate for them to suggest that they stand above theological liberalism and conservatism.

The Emerging Church and the Atonement

It is a concern to see that Emerging Church leaders choose to de-emphasise an essential component of the doctrine of the atonement—penal substitution. The fact that Christ received the punishment that all humans deserve is made very clear throughout the Bible. “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”²³ Thus, while the concept of penal substitution does not exhaust the entire meaning of the atonement, it is an essential component that needs to be retained in order to remain faithful to the Bible.²⁴

However, Emerging Church leaders often downplay or even deny the importance of penal substitution. Many prefer the Christus Victor²⁵ model of the atonement and assert that this theory needs to become more widely accepted in evangelical circles.²⁶ In his writings, Brian McLaren consistently undermines penal substitution and prefers to emphasise atonement theories that do not involve viewing the cross as a payment for sin.²⁷ As one would expect, this leads to McLaren placing little emphasis on the importance of individuals converting to Christianity. D. A. Carson, a respected evangelical

scholar, comes to the following conclusion after examining the writings of McLaren and other Emerging Church leaders in reference to the atonement.

“I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke [an Emerging Church leader in England] have largely abandoned the gospel.”²⁸

Emerging church leaders are critical of the “old-school” Christian focus on seeing people accepting Jesus as their Lord and saviour and converting to Christianity.²⁹ Instead, they would prefer to see Christians make common cause with other world religions so that they see Christianity as an ally rather than opponent.

Brian McLaren goes so far as to state that, despite the fundamental contradictions involved, it is possible to be a follower of Jesus and yet remain a practising Hindu or Buddhist.³⁰ This perspective is profoundly different from that of the New Testament apostles who did not shy away from describing opposing religions as pagan and idolatrous.³¹ While the statements of Emerging Church leaders about other world religions do not match with what the Bible states, they do line up perfectly

Brian McLaren goes so far as to state that, despite the fundamental contradictions involved, it is possible to be a follower of Jesus and yet remain a practising Hindu or Buddhist. This perspective is profoundly different from that of the New Testament apostles who did not shy away from describing opposing religions as pagan and idolatrous.

with the post-modern emphasis on avoiding objective truth statements.

The Emerging Church and the Protestant Reformation

Another common trait of Emerging Churches is the introduction of Roman Catholic doctrines and practices in Protestant churches. It is not uncommon at an Emerging Church service to see members pray through icons,³² perform the sign of the cross,³³ and utilise prayer ropes.³⁴ Brian McLaren even comments favourably on the veneration of Mary and suggests that Protestants have much to learn from this practice.³⁵

21 The position that while men and women are created equal before God, the Bible commands men to take a leadership role at home and in the Church. As a result, the roles of elder and senior pastor are restricted to men. See www.cbmw.org (Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood).

22 Ibid.

23 Isaiah 53:4 (ESV).

24 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 801–823.

25 A theory of the atonement that focuses on Christ’s resurrection and asserts that his resurrection from the dead constituted triumph over the forces of evil. Christus Victor denies the key elements of penal satisfaction theory.

26 David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, ParaChurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and other Modern Maladies*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), p. 58.

27 Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, pp. 100–108.

28 D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 186.

29 Chuck Smith jr and Matt Whitlock, op. cit., pp. 160–161.

30 Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 264.

31 See Acts 17:16–31; Romans 1:19–23; 1 Corinthians 12:2.

32 Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), p. 213.

33 Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 76–77.

34 Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 67.

35 Brian D. McLaren, op. cit. p. 228.

One reason why Emerging Church leaders are so interested in Roman Catholicism is because they are attracted to its mystical elements. The problem with this emphasis on mysticism is that it makes everyone the arbiter of his or her own truth since there is no objective standard by which to judge the veracity of someone's experience.

Contrary to what Brian McLaren says, there are significant theological differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics that cannot simply be papered over. The Protestant reformation occurred because reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Menno Simons vigorously disagreed with the official positions of the Roman Catholic Church on matters such as justification by faith, the authority of church tradition, the doctrine of purgatory, and the veneration of Mary.

The Roman Catholic Church has not changed its position on any of these key issues and, as a result, Protestant Christians must continue to protest against the Roman Catholic Church's position on these important issues. Unfortunately, Emerging Church leaders seem to consider these significant differences to be of little consequence.

One reason why Emerging Church leaders are so interested in Roman Catholicism is because they are attracted to its mystical elements. In keeping with the post-modern preference for feelings and intuition over rationality and logic, Brian McLaren and Leonard Sweet view

mystical experiences as "potent antidotes to post-modern feelings of loss of connection and cries for deep connection."³⁶ The problem with this emphasis on mysticism is that it makes everyone the arbiter of his or her own truth since there is no objective standard by which to judge the veracity of someone's experience.

While McLaren and Sweet emphasise the importance of leaders modelling healthy mysticism in order to prevent crazy mysticism,³⁷ this approach still leaves us begging the question: How do we know what healthy mysticism is unless there is an objective point of reference that tells us what is appropriate? Until Emerging Church leaders abandon their faulty post-modern philosophical assumptions, fellow Christians should be wary about churches that emphasise the need for more mystical experiences.

The Emerging Church and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the science and art of biblical interpretation. While many Emerging Church leaders would be quick to disassociate themselves from the term because of its "modernist" connotations, the fact remains that it is impossible to avoid having some sort of approach to the study of the Bible that affects the way we read and interpret Scripture. Unfortunately, this is an area where post-modern assumptions have undoubtedly had some of their greatest impact on the Emerging Church.

Rob Bell is a case in point of someone who has allowed postmodernism to influence his study of the Bible. Bell likens our faith to jumping on a trampoline. The springs are our doctrines or our statements about God. As a result, just as the exact nature of the springs are not the main focus of jumping

on a trampoline, doctrines are not the point of Christianity and we should not allow ourselves to become concerned if one of these springs is stretched.³⁸ He goes on to give the following example.

"What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?"³⁹

While Bell goes on to state that he believes in the virgin birth, he also argues that our faith in Jesus should not be affected by the truth or falsity of this doctrine. Like other postmodernists, Bell is rejecting foundationalism and asserting that the Christian faith can still be considered to be true regardless of whether or not key doctrines such as the virgin birth themselves are true.

However, the gospel writers are very clear in their statements about the virgin birth⁴⁰ and those who consider themselves to have a high view of Scripture either need to take those statements at face value or else admit that they believe the gospel writers were wrong when they described the virgin birth.

In regards to the doctrine of the Trinity, Bell claims to affirm the orthodox view held by Christians throughout the centuries. However, he then goes on to provide a convoluted and inaccurate description of this doctrine.

"This doctrine [the Trinity] is central to historic, orthodox Christian faith. While there is only one God, God is somehow present everywhere. People began to call this presence, this power of God, his 'Spirit.' So there is God, and then there is God's Spirit. And then Jesus comes among us and has this oneness with God that has people saying things like God has visited us in the flesh (John 1:14). So God is one, but God has also revealed himself to us as Spirit and

36 Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *op. cit.* p. 202.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

38 Rob Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

39 *Ibid.* p. 26.

40 Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:34–35.

then as Jesus. One and yet three. This three-in-oneness understanding of God emerged in several hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. People began to call this concept the Trinity.⁴¹

In saying that the Trinity evolved out of recognition that God is One and yet present everywhere, Bell misrepresents the entire doctrine and confuses the doctrine of God's omnipresence with the doctrine of the Trinity. Biblical scholars acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity was discerned by recognition that the Bible proclaims that there is only one God and yet three persons.⁴² Bell's vague musings about how this doctrine emerged three hundred years after Jesus are inaccurate and misleading. The doctrine of the Trinity is present in Scripture and it is discovered by careful Biblical hermeneutics.

Conclusion

The Emerging Church is having a profound impact on evangelicalism today. While there are positive elements of the Emerging Church movement, its overall contribution to Christian theology has been negative. Emerging Church leaders have adopted post-modern philosophical assumptions that are in opposition to the worldview presented in the Bible. Instead of embracing postmodernism, Christians need to affirm the importance of rationality and defend the factual accuracy and objective truth statements contained within the Bible.

Emerging Church leaders have a low view of Scripture, promote an inaccurate view of the atonement, advocate adopting doctrines and practices of Roman Catholicism, and practice poor Biblical hermeneutics. These are all very good reasons why churches in the Evangelical Mennonite Conference should not look to Emerging Church leaders as teaching authorities or use their materials as teaching sources. ☹

41 Rob Bell, op. cit., p. 22.

42 Millard J. Erickson, op. cit., pp. 321–342.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Walter Truett, ed. *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.
- Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Carson, D. A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.
- Fitch, David E. *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005.
- Franke, John R. *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Geisler, Norman L. and William E. Nix. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
- Gibbs, Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Grenz, Stanley L. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
- Groothuis, Douglas. *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000.
- Jones, Tony. *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- McCallum, Dennis, ed. *The Death of Truth: Responding to the Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.
- McLaren, Brian D. *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a Missional + Evangelical + Post/Protestant + Liberal/Conservative + Mystical/Poetic + Biblical + Charismatic/Contemplative + Fundamentalist/Calvinist + Anabaptist/Anglican + Methodist + Catholic + Green + Incarnational + Depressed-Yet-Hopeful + Emergent + Unfinished Christian*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and A New Kind of Christianity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian D. *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- McLaren, Brian D. *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Pagitt, Doug. *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- Phillips, Timothy R. and Dennis L. Okholm, ed. *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Smith, Chuck, Jr. and Matt Whitlock. *Frequently Avoided Questions: An Uncensored Dialogue on Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.
- Sweet, Leonard, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Hasselmayer. *A is for Abuctive: The Language of the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Webber, Robert E. *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002.

Communion, Creation and Truth:

A response to Michael Zwaagstra's article

Layton Friesen

Layton Friesen is Senior Pastor of Fort Garry EMC in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Michael Zwaagstra's *A Critique of the Emerging Church* is a provocative response to a growing movement. I will not be addressing his paper directly, but will focus on one term which often plays a role in these discussions. It is frequently stated that in order for the church to resist the slide into moral relativism we need to make our final stand on the concept of *absolute truth*.

I share the concern about moral relativism but would like to suggest that *absolute truth* in itself is not worth living or dying for. It does not account for or refer to the unique resources of the Christian faith to resist relativism.

There is another statement which is worth living and dying for, which is a bulwark against moral relativism, and which is more in keeping with the biblical view of the world. That statement is summed up in the first line of the Apostles' Creed: *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth*. We do not believe in absolute truth; we believe in the Creator. Let me explain how I see the difference as important and instructive for the church's relation to postmodernity.

What does the confession of the Father as Creator mean for our view of truth? It implies that truth is not a cold, naked absolute but is a function of communion. There is knowledge to be discovered, there is an ethical path to be followed and there is a heavenly destiny for creation because God the Father freely chooses to love the world. His love for the world is expressed in His eternal plan to pull creation out of chaos and sustain it by His hand.

The world does not have an innate,

autonomous, absolute resistance to chaos and meaninglessness; meaning occurs because God the Father constantly, moment by moment, gifts the world with order, and the world responds in authentic obedience to the Creator. In this gift and response there is truth.

When truth becomes a function of communion rather than an entity to itself, the limitations and opportunities for human's ability to know truth become clarified. Take a good friend as an analogy. If you are my good friend, I can honestly say that I *know* you. I have real knowledge about who you are, but my knowing you is not exhausted by my knowledge *about* you. Propositional truth about you provides a necessary and fruitful path to navigating the mystery that is you.

I cannot get beyond propositional truth in our friendship, but propositional truth is not the aim of our knowing. The aim of our knowing is communion. For you to be a mystery means that in order to know you I will need to engage in a give and take relationship with you (experience) in which you always remain, to some extent, beyond me. You are not some object from which I as the detached subject can extract truth. There is something hidden in you that entices me to continue and deepen the friendship.

Your mysteriousness is no reason to doubt you. There is nothing about a communal understanding of truth which would glory in doubt as a necessary or desirable aspect of knowing. Knowing occurs in the context of mystery—but a mystery is something to be plunged into with childlike

wonder and reverent abandon, not with adult scepticism and doubt.

In a world where the Father is confessed to be Creator, all truth, whether scientific, moral, aesthetic or theological, has these characteristics of truth as a function and servant of communion.

This perspective of truth has implications for how we interact with the world and learn the truth in it. Because it is a free gift out of love, there is no logical necessity about the world that demands that the Father create it one way and not another. The world does not *have* to be anything. When

The world does not have an innate, autonomous, absolute resistance to chaos and meaninglessness; meaning occurs because God the Father constantly, moment by moment, gifts the world with order, and the world responds in authentic obedience to the Creator. In this gift and response there is truth.

truth is a loving gift, the only way to know the world is to get out into the world to see and experience what is actually, in fact, there. There is no way to rationally predict what love will create.

Some have argued that this realization in Christian history—sometimes attributed to the Franciscans, Francis and Bonaventure—resulted in the birth of modern science. Modern science began when we moved from seeing the world as a product of God's mind to seeing it as the gift of His love.¹

1 Loren Wilkinson in a lecture at Regent College, Vancouver.

Whether this is historically accurate or not, when we think of the world as a product of mind we sit and think about it to perceive its nature. When we understand it as the fruit of love we realize it is best discovered in experience; in the give and take of relationship which in the sciences is observation, and in the church is our participation in worship.

When we look at Scripture we see that truth is everywhere and always a function of communion rather than an absolute entity in itself. In the Old Testament, Israel's covenant with the Creator entailed a view of truth expressed in the proverb "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

In the New Testament, when God the Father reveals the Word by which all things were created, the Word is a person living among us, and we see his glory as the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-4,14). We hear Jesus saying, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Truth is not an absolute but a Person in a unique relationship with the Father, opening the way for others to enter this communion.

The Church, proceeding in the early centuries to come to terms with the revelation of God in Jesus, decided that God was *essentially* an event of communion. This event of love was called the Trinity. The Father as the source of the Godhead lovingly caused the Son and the Spirit to exist eternally in loving reciprocity. This became not only a description about God, but also a confession about the fundamental nature of all things as having ontology of communion.² This has its basis in the confession that God the Father is the Creator. God exists in freedom from the world, yet in constant embrace of it. Communion is not just a nice thing to do—communion is a description of the fundamental nature of things, patterned after the being of

² John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) is the book to read here.

Apostles' Creed

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:*

*Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.*

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.

*He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father
Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and
the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.*

Amen.

the Creator who exists in eternal communion.

To confess that God is the Creator puts the lie to any human attempt to construct reality. Reality is constructed in the world's communion with the free Creator. We as creatures do not dictate the terms of our relationship with the Creator: we can observe and understand those terms to the degree deemed necessary by the Father, but we do not establish those terms.

Right and wrong are not arbitrary

choices, as the world is not an arbitrary fact—it exists in a relationship of loving contingency to the Father. Moral relativism or anarchy is another way of naming the dark abyss from which creation was rescued. But the communal nature of truth also means that truth is not some hard and detached fact. Because this is real communion, God gives us space within the encounter to perceive and shape truth personally and culturally in unique ways. This freedom of the person is real but limited by the freedom of God as Creator.

*We believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth. ☩*

Feature Sermon

Falling for a Shadow

Philippians 3:1–21

Henry Friesen

Henry Friesen is part of Morweena EMC, near Arborg, Manitoba. This sermon was presented to the Arborg Christian Fellowship on August 27, 2006.

Philippians 3:1–21 (NIV)

¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

²Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in

his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

One of Aesop's Fables is *The Donkey and His Shadow*. A traveler hired a donkey to convey him to a distant place. The day being intensely hot and the sun shining in its strength, the Traveler stopped to rest and sought shelter from the heat under the shadow of the donkey.

As this afforded protection only for one, and as the Traveler and the owner of the donkey both claimed it, a violent dispute arose between them as to which of them had the right to the Shadow. The owner maintained that he had loaned the donkey only and not his Shadow. The Traveler asserted that he had, with the hire of the donkey, hired his Shadow also. The quarrel proceeded from words to blows, and while the men fought, the donkey galloped off.

In allowing our attention to be consumed by shadows, we often lose the substance.

In this sermon I want to reflect on the dangers of falling for a shadow. Most of us have been victims of frightening monsters which turned out to be nothing but innocuous shadows. Many of us have worked hard at achieving goals only to realize that the promise we sought was but an insubstantial fantasy.

In Philippians 3 Paul warns us against falling for a shadow—the shadow of a religion that promises more than it can deliver, the shadow of a religion that pretends to show us Christ, but which is in fact a chimera (a mirage) that blocks our view of Christ and ultimately distracts us,

with its siren call, to our own demise.

Paul writes this letter from prison, likely in Rome. He begins with robust statements of thanksgiving for the Philippians and their “partnership in the gospel” (1:5). The letter exudes appreciation for their spirit, and exhortation to emulate the humility of Christ, who being in very nature God, did not consider it necessary to grasp at all the trappings and accoutrements of divinity to which He had indisputable claim (2:6). Paul’s concern for the welfare of the Philippians is palpable and his burning desire is for their continued growth to maturity. He has invested himself into this church and he is eager to see that investment return dividends, not for himself, but for the Philippian believers.

In chapter 3 we are given a profound insight into the nature of this development which Paul desires for them. “Finally,” he says, though he is barely more than halfway through his homily. (Clearly this ruse of rekindling long since lapsed attention spans with the false hope of an imminent conclusion is not original with contemporary speakers.)

“Finally, rejoice in the Lord.” This is evidently a recurring theme with Paul, because he freely allows that he is repeating himself, but he expresses his hope that this redundancy will prove beneficial to his listeners.

He wants the Philippian believers to rejoice in the Lord, but his elaboration as to how this should occur takes a surprising turn. Immediately on the heels of this injunction to “rejoice in the Lord,” Paul issues a stern warning: “Watch out for the dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.” Evidently one of Paul’s primary concerns regarding the Philippians’ joy is the threat posed by certain “men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.”

The concern clearly runs deep with Paul, yet calling these people “dogs” seems strong language. What is it that has Paul so incensed? On the face of it this seems to be an issue

In Philippians 3 Paul warns us against falling for a shadow—the shadow of a religion that promises more than it can deliver, the shadow of a religion that pretends to show us Christ, but which is in fact a chimera (a mirage) that blocks our view of Christ and ultimately distracts us, with its siren call, to our own demise.

regarding circumcision, but Paul himself has been all over the place on this circumcision thing. In his earlier days he would have been mortified had he not been circumcised, so how is it that he now considers proponents of circumcision to be dogs? What’s more, the very next line has Paul making the claim that “it is we who are the circumcision.”

Paul seems to be saying there is a real circumcision, but what these people are chasing is only a shadow. What complicates this disagreement is that any neutral bystander would have sided with Paul’s antagonists. If anybody is changing the definition of a circumcision, it is Paul. The people who are insisting on a circumcision of the flesh clearly have history on their side.

Circumcision, you will recall, had been a distinguishing mark for as long as the Israelites had been a people. If you are circumcised you’re in; if you’re not, you’re out. It was how the chosen people had marked their uniqueness as the people of God. It was a reminder, a very physical and indelible permanent reminder to them that they were chosen, called out to be a special people for God. They were in; everybody else was out.

But circumcision was more than an arbitrary mark to set themselves apart. It was done in explicit obedience to the God who had called them out in the first place. Circumcision was the sign given to them by Yahweh himself, and Yahweh instructed them to be careful to observe this practice as an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:9–14: Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not

been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

So there you have it. God himself told them to do this, so why is Paul getting all bent out of shape over what is clearly a simple matter of obedience? How can Paul call people *dogs* for doing what God had instructed them to do? Is it really possible that the very people who are most devout in their insistence on obedience are in fact chasing shadows?

Paul goes on 3:4b-6, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."

How do we distinguish the shadow dancers from the true believers? There could be many interpretations, but how's this: Baptized at 14, an adherent of the Christian religion, a Protestant, an evangelical, denominationally affiliated as a Mennonite, saved by faith (not by works), a holy passion to know God, I faithfully memorize scripture and pray before all meals.

Nobody, but nobody, would out-circumcise Paul. If there were markers to distinguish true believers, Paul had them all. He was a believer among believers. I once worked with a "Paul" who, within minutes of our meeting, proudly informed me that he attended a conservative fundamentalist evangelical independent Baptist Bible chapel. I

How do good things, these things that are intended to help us toward God, in fact become obstacles between us and God? More to the point, is this a problem unique to Paul and the Jewish people or could we suffer the same problem?

worked with him for a week and I don't recall ever having had as many opportunities for growth as I did that week.

But if this is about markers, how do we translate this into our own time? By what marks do we know which side we are on? How do we separate the sheep from the goats? How do we distinguish the shadow dancers from the true believers? There could be many interpretations, but how's this: Baptized at 14, an adherent of the Christian religion, a Protestant, an evangelical, denominationally affiliated as a Mennonite, saved by faith (not by works), a holy passion to know God, I faithfully memorize scripture and pray before all meals.

But Paul goes on in 3:7, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." What? All this good stuff is loss? First you derisively call those who obey God "dogs." Now everything we have been taught to value and cherish in our heritage is to be considered loss? What is going on?

Keep in mind that Paul is not simply saying that all these things are bad. Read Romans for a glimpse of how Paul feels about his heritage, about circumcision, and about the law. In Romans 2 Paul talks about the Jews and the law and he says "circumcision has value if you observe the law." Clearly circumcision is not a bad thing in Paul's view. When Paul talks about the futility of seeking righteousness by keeping the law, he says (7:12) "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good." These words are not to be taken lightly.

Paul has an astonishingly high view of the law and places great

value in obedience. In chapter 9 Paul expresses the great sorrow and unceasing anguish of his heart for his people and their heedless squandering of the incredible blessings that are theirs as God's chosen people. In fact, he declares he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his people. Not for a moment can we allow ourselves to think that Paul has anything but the utmost respect and enduring appreciation for these things which he now counts as loss for the sake of Christ.

Paul enjoins obedience to God and to Scripture frequently, and many of these things which he now considers loss, circumcision is one example, are done in obedience to divine instructions. So how does obedience become an occasion of loss? How can obedience become perilously deceptive shadows?

If all these things are good things, why does Paul consider them loss for the sake of Christ? It would be relatively unproblematic if he called them useless or neutral, but he does not. Paul calls them negative baggage, they are a loss, they put him at a disadvantage when he wants to know Christ. These things get in the way. But how do good things get in the way of what is best in our lives?

How do these good things, these things that are intended to help us toward God, in fact become obstacles between us and God? More to the point, is this a problem unique to Paul and the Jewish people or could we suffer the same problem? Could it be that the better our religion works for us, the greater the danger that it will in fact become an obstacle between us and the God we claim to serve? A shadow which distracts us from the substance?

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Philippians 3:7–8).

In order to gain some perspective on this let us retrace our steps, for a moment, to the words of the Christ whom Paul seeks. What did Jesus say in John 14:6? “I AM the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” But if Jesus is the only way to God, then my religion is not the way, even if my religion is founded on the One who here claims to be the only way.

If Jesus is the only way to the Father, then my beliefs and my confessions and my obedience are not the way. If Jesus is the only way to God, then there is no other way, and any other way which is purported to be a way can only be a distraction from the One True Way.

That is why all these good things, which are intended to help us find God, so easily get in the way of our finding Jesus as the only way. That is why all these good things, all these markers by which we distinguish who’s in from who’s out, are a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, our only way. That is why these shadows, which for good reason bear an uncanny resemblance to the real thing, become deadly distractions to the extent that they draw our focus from the Christ who is the Only Way.

Are these things bad because they can distract us from Christ? No, they are not, because they are given to us as tools, as guidelines to help us find God. In Galatians Paul calls the law a tutor who was given to lead us to

No amount of law-keeping, no amount of right living, not even any right believing will be for us the righteousness that God gives. Our own righteousness is not even an anemic shadow of the righteousness God stands ready to pour into our lives.

Christ (3:24). The law is a good thing, and our religious heritage can be a good thing, but the more we revere the law, and the more confidence we place in our religious/cultural/theological heritage, the greater the danger that we will become satisfied with the shadowy tutor and abandon our quest for the God who is always here, always with us, always within us, but also always beyond our confident grasp, because God owns us; we can never own God.

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith (Phil. 3:7–9).

No amount of law-keeping, no amount of right living, not even any right believing will be for us the righteousness that God gives. Our own righteousness is not even an anemic shadow of the righteousness



God stands ready to pour into our lives.

The righteousness of God comes only from God as a gift, and we appropriate it by faith, but it is not given only if we have the right kind of faith or the right kind of belief. Indubitably, we experience it in proportion to our faith and our obedience, but our experience never accurately reflects what we have been given. We have all been given far more than we can ever understand. Now we see through a glass darkly, then we will know as we are known.

Paul seems to emphasize the radical gifted nature of this righteousness when he restates his original statement “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” and he repeats it as “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

Faith is subsequent to the gift of righteousness, which is bestowed as a free gift, but living faith is how we experience God’s gift of salvation and living faith creates space for that salvation to take root in our lives and to grow and bear the fruit of the Spirit.

Just a little earlier Paul told the Philippians, “Therefore, my dear

If Jesus is the only way to the Father, then my beliefs and my confessions and my obedience are not the way. If Jesus is the only way to God, then there is no other way, and any other way which is purported to be a way can only be a distraction from the One True Way.

We have a role to play in the growth of salvation in our lives, but it is never an original role; it never starts with us. That is why Paul is eager to consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord, for whose sake he has lost all things, because his freedom, his righteousness, his salvation is found in Christ Jesus, not in his religious heritage, not in his obedience, and not in his orthodox beliefs.

friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (2:12–13).

We have a role to play in the growth of salvation in our lives, but it is never an original role; it never starts with us. Our role can only ever be a parasitic response to the original grace of God in our lives—“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” That is why Paul is eager to consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord, for whose sake he has lost all things, because his freedom, his righteousness, his salvation is found in Christ Jesus, not in his religious heritage, not in his obedience, and not in his orthodox beliefs.

(We could go into some detail here about how some of what passes for evangelical orthodoxy owes more to Greek philosophy and its development into the Cartesian rationalism of the *cogito, ergo sum* than it does to a robust Judeo-Christian understanding of Scripture, but the restless shifting and the glazed eyes tell me this is not the time or the place.)

Paul’s driving desire is to know Christ because it is in knowing Christ that imbues his life with a character of integrity that a religious expression can only imitate weakly, and usually attempts to circumscribe. Religious expressions are often implicated in twisted attempts to make life look better than it really is. Paul wants to

know Christ without regard for where it takes him, and this is a powerful indicator of how knowing Christ eclipses everything else in his life.

Paul says in 3:10–11, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul begins with sentiments that we can all echo whole-heartedly. We all want to know Christ. We all want to know the power of his resurrection. Of course, that’s a no-brainer. But Paul knows that resurrection presupposes death. There can be no resurrection without a prior death. If we want to know the power of his resurrection, we will have to share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Precisely what that means Paul seems not to be entirely certain, saying “and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

We could talk about that for a while, but ultimately I believe this is something which we work out in life as we follow Christ’s example day by day. To know Christ is, ultimately, to live the life of Christ in our own time. We cannot understand the meaning of sharing in his death or resurrection unless we live that meaning.

It is in some sense as we die to ourselves and all the markers of our religious expressions, and it is as we learn what it means to live to God alone, which can never be done as something distinguished from our mundane life, that we find ourselves truly alive for the first time. That in

itself becomes a kind of resurrection.

And so our choice is clear, but that does not make the choice easy. We can choose life, the life we have come to appreciate, the life in which we are comfortable and satisfied, a religion that works for us, or we can choose resurrection life, which will inevitably mean death.

This is why it is so important for Paul to know Christ. As long as you choose the life of the shadows, the specter of death will loom large because you cannot escape the knowledge that at some point your choice for life will be rendered moot. Only when you choose Christ over life can death’s terror be mitigated, because only Christ is larger than life and death.

Hence the passion to know Christ beyond any religious understanding and commitment and excessively simplistic obedience becomes the only real choice for life, for life

It is in some sense as we die to ourselves and all the markers of our religious expressions, and it is as we learn what it means to live to God alone, that we find ourselves truly alive for the first time.

lived in the ordinary, employing and appreciating all that is good in life, including one’s heritage, one’s religion, and one’s theology, but always remembering that these good things are stepping stones only as long as they remain utterly dispensable in the overarching quest to know Christ.

In Colossians 2:16–17 Paul says, “Do not let anyone judge you with regard to religious observations. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” We dare not allow an obsession with shadows to distract us so that we lose the reality which is found only in Christ. ☉

Book Review

***The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light*, Tom Harpur (Thomas Allen, Toronto, 2004), 244 pages, \$34.95.** Reviewed by Terry M. Smith, executive secretary, Board of Church Ministries and an ordained EMC minister of United Church-Presbyterian roots.

Years ago in *The United Church Observer* a minister asked in an article, "What evidence is there that Jesus really existed?" His answer: "There is enough." It would be helpful for Tom Harpur to remember this.

Tom Harpur has served as an Anglican minister and a seminary professor. For years he has been a prominent religion writer and journalist in Canada. Now he has "very grave doubts" whether Jesus ever existed (p. 158). But this conclusion, and his wider enthusiasm for a highly non-traditional faith, exceeds what I see as useful.

He invites readers to "be patient and hear the argument to the end" (p. 158), but repeated assertions based on inadequately presented evidence do not foster patience.

The Oxford-trained minister turned journalist says that the apostle Paul "never once mentions the man Jesus, in the full historical sense" (p. 167), but Romans 3:1 speaks of Jesus' descent from David and Romans 9:5 speaks of Christ coming from Israel "according to the flesh."

References to Jesus in ancient Roman and Jewish sources are basically dismissed by Harpur, yet Harry Emerson Fosdick, perhaps the most prominent liberal of early 20th century, wrote *The Man from Nazareth*, and its first chapter is *A Real Man, Not a Myth*. Fosdick said, "Had Jesus not really lived, none would have known it better than the Jews, and, had it been possible, they surely would have raised that issue" (p. 3).

Did Albert Schweitzer say there was no traditional Jesus of Nazareth as a historical person? Harpur says yes (p. 166), but this appears to be a misreading of Schweitzer. While Schweitzer was critical of writing the life of Jesus, that's far from questioning whether Jesus actually existed.

What about other individuals of ancient times whose existence is

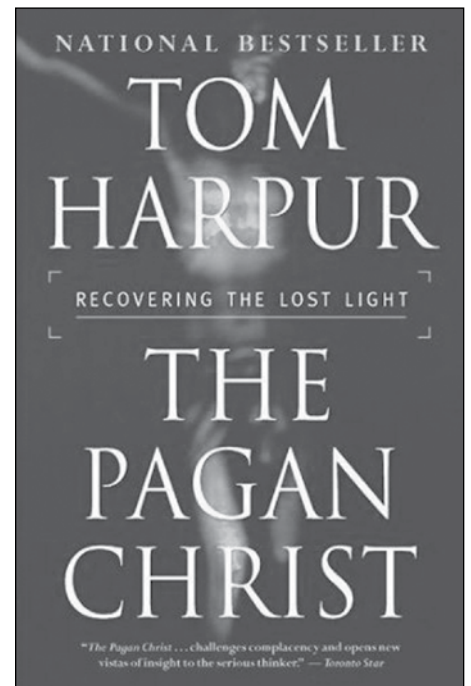
accepted? Harpur fails to mention how early are the records of Jesus' existence by comparison. Nor does he discuss how we possess many copies of New Testament writings, the abundance of which is the envy of many scholars in other areas of ancient studies. Good arguments can be made that individual New Testament documents were written earlier than the dates that Harpur prefers.

Harpur fails to mention how early are the records of Jesus' existence. Nor does he discuss how we possess many copies of New Testament writings, the abundance of which is the envy of many scholars in other areas of ancient studies.

Given his concern about people who "quote—usually out of context—whatever Bible verses seem to prop up their position" (p. 7), his selective use of Scripture seems curious. Even fundamentalist Christians, though, often include the chapter and verse, allowing their use of quotations to be checked further.

"Not after the flesh" is quoted from 2 Corinthians 5:16—but Paul was saying he had misjudged Jesus, not that Jesus' historical existence is unimportant.

The "clincher," Harpur says, is Colossians 1:27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." He interprets this as "a mystical, spiritual reality... [that] has nothing whatever to do with a presumed historical Jesus" (p. 170). Rather, Paul was speaking to Gentiles who heard the gospel from Jewish Christians. The verse says that Gentiles are included within Christ's concern, and isn't a denial of Jesus as a real person of Jewish roots.



Harpur, of course, says more than this; his "grave concerns" about Jesus' historical existence form only one chapter among 10. If you choose to read this book—and there are many *more helpful* titles around—compare it carefully to other materials.

While drawing heavily on conclusions of a few favourite writers (which we all have), Harpur does not adequately document the references to them; with his background, he could have. If his defense is that he writes for "ordinary, intelligent laypeople" (p. 7), one can question how this level of documentation serves individuals who might take away from this book more than they should.

Seeing flaws in the Church, Harpur would move it in a non-traditional way. Yes, the Christian Church is flawed—and wonderful. But having read how he handles the evidence for Jesus as a person of history, I can't share Harpur's enthusiasm for where the writer wants to take us. ☹

The Final Word

Nevertheless, the universal Christian community, of which the Mennonite church is admittedly only a small fragment, is today facing serious religious, moral, and social-ethical issues which, while not calling for a simple return to the golden age of the classical past, signify a need for retrieving from the past a theocentric-theological framework for modern anthropology. The question for us as Mennonites in particular is: How can we be faithful to our biblical foundations and to our origins in the 'radical' left-wing of the Reformation, and at the same time face openly, honestly and realistically our relatively novel present historical situation? In short, how are we to seek creative solutions to the urgent issues that face us now and will no doubt confront us with increasing intensity in the imminent future?"

– Dr. A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Pandora Press/Herald Press, 2001).

Send editorial inquiries and submissions to Editor, *Theodidaktos*, Box 129, Kleefeld, Manitoba R0A 0V0; kemc@mts.net; 204-377-4773.

View *Theodidaktos* online at www.emconf.ca/theodidaktos.htm.