



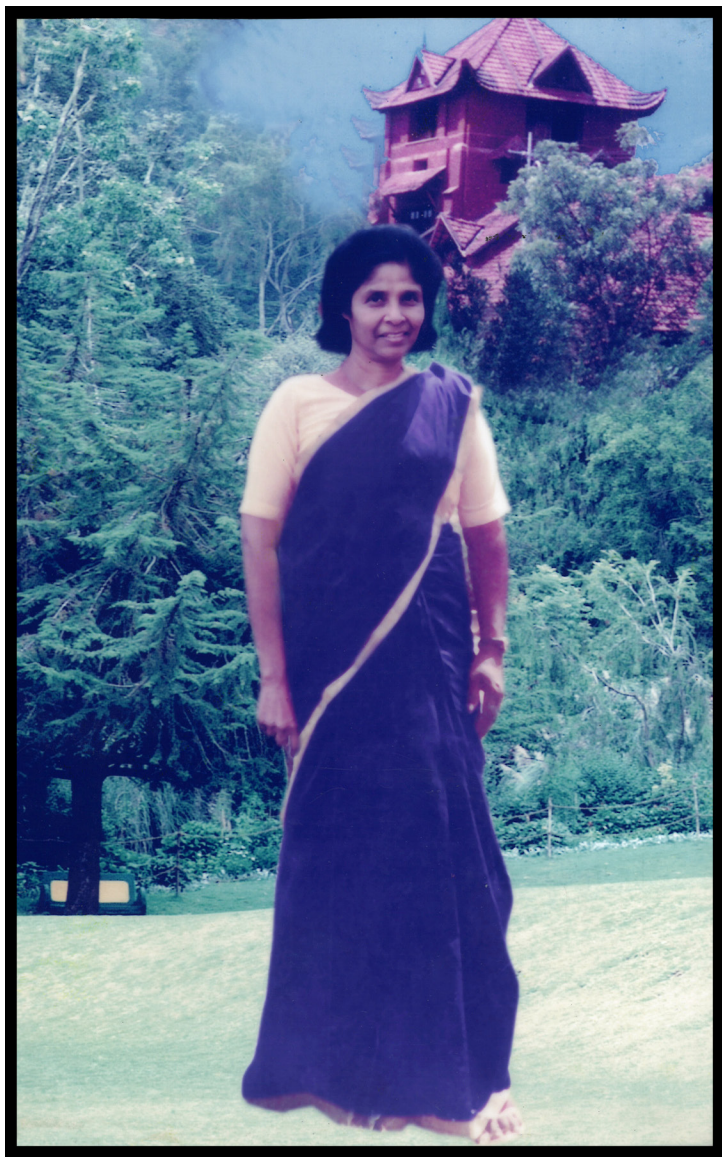
Unity in Diversity

Ben M. Carter



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In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.



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for my parents Ben W. and Hilda M. Carter.

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth when he came would guide the disciples (and by implication all who confess Christ) into all truth.¹ He prayed that his disciples be sanctified by the truth² and that those who believed in him be brought into complete unity as a testimony to the world that God had sent Jesus and that Jesus had loved his followers.³ This strongly implies that the truth into which the Spirit will guide us is not a divided truth but a single truth, a united truth.

Paul, too, suggests this when, writing to the Corinthians, he appeals

¹ John 15:13. It may be argued that the Spirit was given to the apostles in a special way to help them to bear witness and establish an accurate tradition. However, the majority of our doctrines and the compilation of the canon occurred centuries after the apostles died. It makes little sense to suppose that the Spirit of truth would comfort, counsel, and then abandon the church when so much of the work had yet to be done. Of course the apostles were inspired in a special way but it does not follow that the Spirit was withdrawn after the apostles had gone to be with the Lord. Indeed, we may assume from Hebrews 12:1 that not only does the Spirit abide with his church, he does so in the company of many witnesses and we may infer that the apostles are among those witnesses.

² John 17:17. The Greek here is hagiazō which means to be set apart for a sacred use or to be made holy. The use of the Anglo-Saxon holy suggests health and particularly moral soundness. We will discuss the implications such an interpretation has for sanctification in Chapter 8.

³ John 17:23

to them as brothers to be perfectly united in mind and thought⁴ and refers to Jesus as having become their wisdom from God.⁵ Of course God who gives this wisdom is one. Paul tells the Corinthian church that the spiritual man makes judgments about all things because such a man has the mind of Christ.⁶ Paul also contrasts the message of the cross, a message he describes as foolishness to those who are perishing, with the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of the scholar and philosopher of this age, and affirms that it was by that foolishness that God was pleased to save those who believed.⁷ Consequently Paul is also able to contrast spiritual and carnal wisdom as he traces divisions in the church to the jealousy and quarreling inspired by the carnal mind.⁸ Hence, Paul's message rested not on men's wisdom but on God's power, power by which God was able to save.⁹ The kingdom of God, Paul says, is not a

⁴ I Cor. 1:10. See, too, Gal. 3:27-28.

⁵ I Cor. 1:30.

⁶ I Cor. 2:15-16. To fully appreciate the claim Paul is making here note what is said about God's wisdom in Ps. 147:5, the relationship the believer has in that regard to the Lord as it is described in Deu. 29:29, and the humility of the psalmist in Ps. 131:1 and 139:6. Apparently Paul believes that this situation has been fundamentally altered.

⁷ I Cor. 1:18-21.

⁸ I Cor. 3:3.

⁹ I. Cor. 2:5.

matter of talk but of power - by which he means that we do not speculate about empty things.¹⁰ This is made clear in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians when the apostle reminds his readers that the gospel came to them not merely with words but with power.¹¹ This power, evidenced by signs and miracles, is given by the Spirit (i.e. the Spirit of truth)¹² and witnesses to God's intervention in the natural course of events to create something new, to bring victory and to heal. It is the power of God focused in the cross, that instrument of guilty death by which God has chosen to save believers. Jeremiah made the connection between healing and salvation.¹³ Jesus used his power to heal as an evidence of his power to forgive,¹⁴ and Athanasius in his Orations against the Arians¹⁵ makes that connection central to our trinitarian confession.

This emphasis on truth and wisdom as it related to Jesus and to the one God has made doctrine central to Christianity. From the very beginning it was what one believed about Jesus (that he was the messiah,

¹⁰ I. Cor. 4:20.

¹¹ I. Thes. 1:5.

¹² Rom. 15:18-19.

¹³ Jer. 17:14.

¹⁴ Luke 5:20-25.

¹⁵ Athanasius, Orations against the Arians, The Third Oration, sec. 55, p. 243-244.

that he had come in the flesh, that he had risen from the dead, that his death and resurrection were redemptive) that distinguished Christianity and Christianity's doctrine of monotheism from Judaism and Judaism's doctrine of monotheism. And it has been concerns over doctrine which have shaped the Christian tradition throughout the history of the church.

However, doctrinal disputes have done more than shape Christian tradition, they have divided the church and Protestantism has been particularly culpable here. The rancor among Protestants has often been extreme. It is very peculiar, for example, that a theologian of the stature of Paul Tillich should begin his three volume systematic by criticizing American fundamentalists - but that is precisely what he does. While admitting that American fundamentalism is the same as European orthodoxy, Tillich denies that it can today be considered normative. Indeed, because it does not in Tillich's opinion answer to our modern situation but instead raises to the level of eternal immutable truth a tentative solution which was viable yesterday but which has become very problematic in the contemporary West, it evidences, in Tillich's mind, demonic characteristics.¹⁶ Yesterday's orthodoxy is today's deception.

It seems to me that Tillich has put his finger on the crux of the conservative dilemma. By pointing so starkly to the tentative nature of

¹⁶ Tillich, P., Systematic Theology, Vol. I, Introduction A. sec. 1, p.3

theological conclusions Tillich has reminded us that theology is very much a human enterprise and, as Calvin pointed out in the first volume of his systematic, it is human nature to perpetually construct idols by trying to render God's revelation into culturally comprehensible forms.¹⁷ This is partly because even the regenerate heart is still corrupt and prone to self-deception.¹⁸ When one couples this corruption with the philosophical realities of a post-Kantian metaphysic, one begins to recognize that even very good theology remains provisional. It is the best we can do with the information we have and the approach we have chosen.

Mircea Eliade has pointed out at length that it is the nature of the religious person to long not for illusion but for the very essence of reality.¹⁹ Conservative believers are in search of universals. They fear relativity yet relativity is precisely what theology offers. Theology is the secularization of the divine. However, since theology is essentially an attempt to achieve some level of unified understanding, all believers must to some degree do theology. Even the anti-theological bias of that biblicism which Tillich condemns is grounded on theological assumptions.

¹⁷ Calvin, J., Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, Chap. 11, sec. viii.

¹⁸ Ibid., Vol. III, Chap. 2, sec. x.

¹⁹ Eliade, M., The Sacred and the Profane, Chap. 1, p. 22, 28, 34, 43; Chap. 2, p. 80, 91; Chap. 4, p. 202.

The idea that the text should control the judgment of the interpreter is the expression of a hermeneutical approach which reveals upon examination a host of cultural assumptions. It is one thing to say the Bible teaches inerrant truth, it is a very different thing to properly exegete and apply that truth. Inerrancy means little if one's hermeneutic leads one to the wrong conclusions. What is frequently at issue is not the text but one's approach to the text. Hence theological disputes often cannot be resolved by a simple appeal to Scripture.

Yet the desire for certainty remains and fuels the tendency toward fragmentation. As in the first century so today, people are quicker to heed the one who speaks with authority than they are to heed the one who only discusses possibilities. But to speak with authority on questions of truth is to be intolerant of alternatives. One must choose and, having chosen, one must affirm. It is this demand for a decision that gives the lie to the boast made by Sabine Baring-Gould in the 1864 hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers" that we are one in hope, doctrine and charity. If we have certainty, it is that we are certainly not one in any of those things!

The desire for certainty, a desire which is the core of what it means to be religious, hears gladly the demands of Jesus or Paul and follows myriad ways among the rocks of history. It is difficult to know what to make of churches which call themselves Wesleyan or Lutheran

in light of Paul's criticism of similar sounding divisions in the Corinthian church.²⁰ It is difficult to know what to make of theologies that legitimize themselves by appeals to specific men or specific philosophical movements in light of Paul's statements about the wisdom of this age and the carnal mind. It is difficult to know what to make of traditions based on questions of polity since Paul saw the singleness and uniqueness of Christ as requiring unity in the church.²¹

Indeed, though Jesus and Paul both desired the unity of believers and affirmed the power of the Spirit of truth to create and preserve that unity, disputes over truth have been one of the key sources of divisions. To study the history of theology is to study the emergence of plurality. At the very least such plurality may witness to a profound carnality in the church and should cause us to question the process of deliberation which gives rise to it. At the very worst it casts doubt over the power of the

²⁰ I. Cor. 1:12-13. It seems to me that the Wesleyan/Methodist Church presents us with a particularly difficult problem here since Wesley made it quite clear that he did not wish to divide the Anglican church and since an active evangelical element was able to remain quite productively within the Anglican Church and work to reinvigorate that church. I recognize the distinct history of the American Methodist tradition here but recall Charles Wesley's satire on his brother's sending Thomas Coke to the newly formed country:

Wesley his hands on Coke has laid

But who laid hands on him?

The origins of the Anglican Church itself presents us with another set of difficulties.

²¹ I. Cor. 1:13.

Spirit to perform as Jesus promised the Spirit would perform and hence it casts grave doubts over our claims to have had truth and to have preserved and properly understood that truth. It is the purpose of this study to address such questions by investigating some of the origins of Christian pluralism.

In the first chapter I will argue that the historical/cultural context into which revelation is given limits both the revelation and our understanding of it and that revelation is as a consequence partial and culturally conditioned. Using the Jewish experience as my example I will argue that the recipients of the revelation were misled by their historical experience as they attempted to understand their role in the divine economy and that despite their serious and sincere efforts Jesus harshly criticized their failure. I will go on to point out that arguments about ultimates within the context of contingency create divisions and that variety by its very nature as the creature of contingency must be provisional.

In the second chapter I will use doctrines about the Antichrist to illustrate the problem of pluralism within the Christian context. I will point out that during the early centuries of the church the doctrine took on a form that was not required by Scripture but which its fashioners sought to root in Scripture. I will show that as a myth to interpret events

in history particular applications of that doctrine (even when enshrined in confessions) have always proven wrong but that to its credit it has served to remind believers that they should watch and wait and it created the impression that some passages of Scripture which might otherwise seem distant and obscure were immediately relevant to the believers' lives.

In the third chapter I will point out that the provisional nature of theology makes faith based on orthodox confession a risk, that often disagreements within theological systems reflected a conflict between worldviews and that worldviews are not themselves approximations of truth but are either true or false.

In the fourth chapter I will argue that the admission that truth statements are relative requires an admission as well that ethical norms are relative and I will also point out that in the modern world we constantly experience the relative nature of ethical norms and legal codes even within our own country.

In the fifth chapter I will argue that Pentecost where the deeds of God were proclaimed in a variety of languages provide us with a warrant for assuming that constancy amid change is an appropriate expression of how the Spirit of truth might work.

In the sixth chapter I will point out that non-linear or aperiodic systems which expressed constancy amid change are the norm in the

natural order and that as a consequence it should not surprise us that such constancy amid change in the natural order (which was created and is guided by God) finds its counterpart in the development of ideas about doctrine. I will argue that the problem is not the nature of truth but our expectations about the nature of truth, expectations we have inherited from Hellenism.

In the seventh chapter I will argue that evolutionary paradigms whether applied to the natural world or the world of human ideas are better vehicles of truth than are static paradigms and that such a conclusion was warranted by recent discoveries about the nature of non-linear systems.

In the eighth chapter I will argue that ethical relativism requires us to make a clear distinction between holiness which is divine and morality which is human and that our obligations as Christians are more authentically expressed in terms of faith and love than in terms of knowledge and adherence to a moral code.

CHAPTER 1: The God of History

Revelations come from God in many ways¹ but all of them come at particular times, in particular places, and in specific traditions and languages. Like miracles, revelations are intrusive. They are given. They come from beyond to instruct us. They interpret our existence in ways that might not otherwise occur to us and provide us with information we might not otherwise have. For our part, we seek to understand revelation from within our own historical-cultural context even though that revelation may have been articulated within a very different historical-cultural context. It is our historical-cultural context which structures and limits our understanding of revelation even as it is the historical-cultural context in which the revelation was given which structures and limits the revelation. This suggests that revelation is partial and culturally conditioned and that our understanding of revelation is partial and culturally conditioned. Hence any particular revelation may have meanings which are not apparent when the revelation is given but which become quite clear later and meanings which are quite clear when the revelation is given but which become obscure later. In other words, a revelation may have levels of truth which are more relevant in one

¹ Heb. 1:1-2.

historical-cultural context than they are in another. There is nothing in the nature of revelation itself which guarantees its universality nor is there anything in universal truth itself which guarantees to it a particular and specific significance and meaning. This makes our attempts to understand revelation problematic and introduces the very real possibility of error whenever we attempt to understand and to draw conclusions from our understanding.²

The Jewish experience is an excellent illustration of this problem. The Jews believed that they had been called by God to be a people separate from others. Much of the Jewish law, particularly that part of the law we call the ceremonial law,³ was intended to re-enforce this sense of their separation. However, Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles were

² This conditionedness of truth and the relative nature of significance makes the claim of a general revelation difficult to defend. If we have learned anything since the age of exploration, it is that the cosmos and human experience have been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Universals are few in number and, where they can be demonstrated, are often easy to explain by appealing to biological or perceptual realities. Even if there was at one time a universal myth, it has long been forgotten. The heavens may sing of the glory of God but the song teaches nothing to those who can no longer hear the song.

³ We tend to divide the law into civil, ceremonial, and moral aspects but this is a late reading of its precepts and quite alien to the spirit in which it was given. The law is better read as a single code relevant to all aspects of a community's life.

informed as much by Jewish experience and by Jewish reflection upon that experience as they were by Jewish efforts to rightly apply the law. The alliances sought by the kings of Judah to counter-balance threats from the northern empires of Assyria or Babylon, from the Philistines or from Egypt, the later domination of Judah by Babylon and the Jewish exile in Babylon after 586 B.C., the Hasmonean revolt against the Seleucids of Syria (167 - 164 B.C.) and the Roman occupation all had roles in structuring the Jews' sense of their own identity. And because the Jews believed that Yahweh was the Lord of history, it was deemed quite proper to seek in history Yahweh's lessons for his people. Yet it was as the rabbis meditated upon the law in the light of that experience and with an ear to the prophets that they began to construct those hedges around the law, hedges which Jesus condemned when, quoting Isaiah 29:13, he said, "But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."⁴ In short, it was Jewish experience informed by revelation which conspired to mislead the Jewish people with regard to their role as God's chosen. Their interpretations of that role were scriptural and justifiable and there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of those who developed the various interpretations but their scriptural awareness, the plausibility of their elucidations and their sincerity did

⁴ Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7.

nothing to mitigate the guilt of the exegetes. Jesus did not applaud their serious efforts, instead he severely criticized the results of those efforts!

Because Yahweh is perceived to be the God of history, the God who works out his purposes for humanity within history, and because Jesus is believed to be God incarnate in history, an awareness of and an interpretation of history has always been of fundamental importance to Jewish and Christian theology. Revelation comes in history and its significance is clarified by the historical-cultural setting in which the revelation is heard, yet the Jews with a relatively large amount of data at their disposal enjoyed only the most qualified success as, wrestling with the meaning of their own history in the context of divine law, they attempted to understand their place in the world and God's expectations of them. Michael E. Stone points out that between the fourth and first century B.C. immense changes were transforming the Middle East, that Hellenism, itself a fragmented tradition, was a central catalyst for these changes, and that Judaism in a way typical of other Hellenized religions allowed for great plurality of thought.⁵ The pillars of Judaism have always been monotheism, the Torah, and the land. Within the framework

⁵ Stone, Michael E., "Judaism at the Time of Christ," Scientific American, 228, 1973, pp. 80 ff.

provided by those pillars orthopraxy has always been more important to the Jew than has orthodoxy. It is one's conformity to the law rather than one's metaphysical speculations which is definitive. The Pharisees and the Sadducees may have disagreed with one another over the question of the resurrection or the existence of angels and spirits but they did not on that account attempt to deny one another access to the Temple.⁶ But the very plurality that Michael Stone discusses is suspect. Is it not an example of the triumph not of the Spirit of truth but of the spirit of the age? Has not the unified voice of revelation been obscured by the qualified voice of interpretation?

Jesus when he spoke to this fluid situation spoke not with the qualified voice of the scribes but with the unified voice of authority. However, the church he founded and to which he promised the Spirit of truth has heard that unified voice in a very qualified way. Almost from its inception the church was divided by opinion even among the disciples themselves and those divisions of opinion have over the centuries proven that even institutional unity is impossible.

This is in one sense ironic. Paul warned Titus to beware of

⁶ Acts 23:8.

argumentative men⁷ but in a pluralistic environment where opinion is a candidate for ultimate truth, who can point with certainty to the argumentative man? Had Athanasius not maintained his position so steadfastly against the majority of the bishops, he would have never been canonized. The line which separates the saint from the obstinate is a fine one indeed!

Theology is formulated within the contingencies of history, often by argument as the Reformers were fond of pointing out. Those contingencies create the conditions that forever modify theology and reveal its formulations as provisional. At the same time theologians strive to express what is ultimate. Argument about ultimates within the framework of contingency creates division.

Yet God has chosen to reveal divine truth within contingency. And the theologians who have speculated upon the revelation have not always been wrong. The rabbis influenced by Babylonian and Persian

⁷ Titus 3:10. The KJV renders this as "a man that is an heretick" but the translation is a poor choice of words. The RSV is more nearly right with factious, a rendering which the ASV follows. The NIV uses divisive. W.J. Conybeare in The Epistles of Paul uses sectarian. I have chosen argumentative in an attempt to capture as many of these nuances as possible.

thought properly understood that a general resurrection and subsequent judgment was required if the claim that God is righteous was to prove justified. But the rabbis also influenced by Babylonian and Persian thought constructed a hierarchy of demons which they attempted to manipulate and in this way they merited Christ's condemnation. Christian theologians properly intuited the trinitarian implications of the revelation of God in Jesus and, as a necessity of Christian soteriology, developed the doctrine of creation from nothing. But Christian theologians also developed the arguments which became the linchpin for that evolving system of penance and indulgence upon which the medieval church based so much of its discipline. And Christian theologians labored long to justify the institution of slavery as it came to be practiced in the Christian West in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Such is the checkered legacy of the theological enterprise.

To communicate is to risk being misunderstood or to risk being understood only partially. Even if one has been understood fully, that which one has communicated may have implications which go far beyond the specific set of circumstances in which one has addressed one's hearers. Variety is the creation of contingency and variety is provisional even if that which initiated the process giving rise to the variety is

absolute. Yet one of the central tenets of the Judao-Christian tradition is that God is the God of history. If the tenet is true, we may fairly assume that the Spirit of truth broods over those waters and nurtures those conflicting currents which carry the divine message to those with ears to hear.

In the next chapter we shall examine how one such current developed over the course of the centuries.

CHAPTER 2: The Doctrine of the Antichrist

If one were to ask Christians where in the Bible they should look for information about the Antichrist, most would probably respond with the book of Revelation, some might say Daniel or II Thessalonians. In fact, the term antichrist occurs in none of these books. It is found only in four verses, three in I John and one in II John.¹ In these passages it is clear that when John uses the term he is describing someone who does not believe that Jesus came in the flesh, who denies that Jesus is the messiah or christ, and who denies the Father and the Son. John also tells his readers that there are many antichrists and that their large number is an evidence that we are living in the last time.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible in footnoting these passages defines antichrist as referring to any concentration of enmity against God and suggests that John was referring specifically to false teachers, possibly Gnostics. Smith's Bible Dictionary concurs, suggesting that John was concerned about the errors of the Docetics (those who regarded Christ's sufferings as imaginary), the Gnostics (those who denied that Christ had come in the flesh), and a teacher named Cerinthus who lived in Asia

¹ I John 2:18, 22; 4:3; II John 7.

Minor around the end of the first century and who taught that the world was created and held in bondage by an angel, that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary yet had acquired more wisdom and more righteousness than other men, that the Spirit of God did not come to Jesus until he was baptized by John and departed from Jesus before he was crucified so that it was only Jesus rather than Jesus with the Spirit who suffered and rose again. However, Smith's goes on to suggest that John was probably referring as well to a particular person who would appear at the end of the age and Smith's seeks a scriptural justification for the assertion by uniting Daniel 11:21, II Thessalonians 2:3, and Revelation 13. However, nowhere in these passages does the phrase antichrist occur. The Daniel verse refers to a vile person (KJV), a contemptible person (RSV, NIV), or a despicable person (ASV), probably Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175 -163 B.C.). The passage in II Thessalonians refers to the man of sin, the son of perdition (KJV), the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition (RSV), the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction (ASV), the man of lawlessness, the man doomed to destruction (NIV). The thirteenth chapter of Revelation describes two beasts, one rising from the sea, the other from the earth, beasts to whom authority is given and who are worshipped, and the chapter ends with the famous reference to the number of the beast. Warrant for uniting the Daniel and II Thessalonian

passages has been sought in the similarities of some of the language in these passages, suggesting to some commentators that Paul, when he wrote to the church in Thessalonica, had the Daniel passage in mind. Because in the Hebrew tradition events at one point in history are sometimes employed by prophets as types of later events,² this similarity of language has been used to argue that Antiochus IV Epiphanes was possibly a prefigurement of someone else. Once that assumption is accepted, it is plausible to connect the Daniel and II Thessalonian passages to the thirteenth chapter of Revelation.

Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) of the Christian Reformed Church in his Systematic Theology notes that in I John 2:18 the singular antichrist is used without an article. Berkhof argues from this omission that John must consider antichrist a technical name though whether that technical name refers to an actual person or the personification of a principle is not,

² Isaiah 7:14, as an example, prophesies that a virgin (in the light of Matthew 1:23 I accept virgin as a better translation of the Isaiah passage than young woman) shall conceive and bear a son. Isaiah then lies with the prophetess and she conceives and bears a son (Isa. 8:3). In one sense then the prophecy is fulfilled yet its genuine fulfillment takes place in Bethlehem seven hundred years later. In the same way, the Rachel weeping for her children passage in Jeremiah 31:15 would appear from the context to refer to the lamentations of the exiles of Judah yet it finds its complete fulfillment in Herod's slaughter of the innocents (Matt. 2:18).

in Berkhof's opinion, very clear.³

Gordon Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary believes that John probably had both meanings in mind. In his A Theology of the New Testament he writes that the spirit of antichrist is manifest wherever one finds heresy and schism but that there will be a final supreme manifestation of this spirit in a single person at the end of the age.⁴

Yet surely a connection between the passages in Daniel, II Thessalonians and Revelation is by no means necessary. And to base such a connection on a perceived similarity of language and a view of history where one event can prefigure another event is at least tenuous. Just as surely nothing constrains us to identify antichrist with a person or even with a spirit of heresy and schism, even if, as Berkhof argues, the absence of an article indicates that the term can be a technical one. It is fairly clear from the context that John is using the prevalence of a particular type of teacher to inform his readers of their place in history. Nothing in the passages requires that we go beyond this. However, in

³ Berkhof, L., Systematic Theology, Part VI, Sec. "General Eschatology", Chap. 1, pp. 701-702.

⁴ Ladd, G.E., A Theology of the New Testament, Part V, Chap. 43, p. 613.

spite of this absence of necessity the idea that a person, the Antichrist, will play a key eschatological role is a pervasive one in Christian tradition and most Christians (and even many non-Christians) believe that the Bible teaches such a doctrine. Yet, as is so often the case when examining the genesis of a doctrine, we must seek its origin not in Scripture but in interpretations of Scripture that arose in the early church.

The idea that the Antichrist will appear as an eschatological person, goes back to three men who dominated the late second and early third century of Christian theology: Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. Irenaeus in the late second century was probably the earliest exegete to conceive of Antichrist as a specific person. Arguing from Genesis 49:17, Deuteronomy 33:22, Jeremiah 8:16 and Revelation 7:5, Irenaeus points out that Dan is dropped from the catalogue of the tribes of Israel and, from the omission, argues that Antichrist would be a Jew from the tribe of Dan who would pretend to be the messiah.

Tertullian in the late second and early third century believed that Irenaeus was right but also believed that Antichrist would not appear so long as the Roman empire was intact. Tertullian believed, as did so many of his contemporaries, that the Roman empire, like all other

empires, had within it the seeds of its own dissolution. History was the stage upon which the grand themes of fate or destiny were played out. Christians interpreted this classic Greek scenario in light of God's curse upon the earth in Genesis 3:17-18 and with the Greeks they believed that human beings could have little impact on what God (or fate) had predetermined. Hence the Roman empire like all human efforts was doomed to fail. Tertullian further believed that when the Roman empire collapsed ten kingdoms would emerge from the wreckage and that the role of the Antichrist would be to unite these ten kingdoms. Tertullian's idea that Paul's restraining force in II Thessalonians 2:6-7 was the pax Romana still finds champions among contemporary exegetes.⁵

It was Hippolytus in the early third century who added to the portrait of Antichrist the idea that he would be able to perform signs and wonders in the tradition of Jesus.

Hence by the beginning of the third century a tradition was well established that the Antichrist would be a person who would as a false messiah assume a central role in history. Lactantius (240-320) proposed

⁵ Guthrie, D., New Testament Theology, Chap. 8, p. 808. See, too, Guthrie's view of law as a restraining force which he discusses briefly in Chapter 9, p. 946 of the same work.

a resurrected Nero as a candidate. Augustine refers to this tradition but expresses skepticism.⁶ Theodoret (393-458) proposed that the Antichrist would be the Devil incarnate.

In the Middle Ages in the West the Tiburtine Sibylline introduced the idea of a great emperor who would arise prior to the appearance of Antichrist and Pseudo-Methodius envisioned such an emperor over-coming Islam. The Crusades intensified this apocalyptic speculation and found a focus in Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), a mystic and philosopher who sought to interpret the course of history and who became a Cistercian monk. Joachim's ideas were adopted by the Spiritual Franciscans and the

⁶ Augustine, City of God, Book XX, Chap. 19, p. 933. However, Augustine is certainly among those who engaged in apocalyptic speculation. He talks of ten persecutions to be followed by a final persecution conducted by the Antichrist (City of God, Book XVIII, Chapters 52 and 53, pp. 835-839) and basing his argument on Paul's description in II Thessalonians, Augustine confesses himself to be among those who believe that the Antichrist will be a particular person (City of God, Book XX, Chap. 19, pp. 931-932).

The case of Nero is an interesting one. Berkhof, who incidentally does not believe that Rome really qualifies as Antichrist though it does in his opinion have anti-Christian elements, notes that the letters in the Hebrew word for Nero are exactly equivalent to the number 666 found in Revelation 13:18 (Systematic Theology, p. 702) and according to Suetonius the belief that Nero was still alive or would return from the dead haunted the Roman world for a long time (The Twelve Caesars, Chap. 6, sec. 57, p. 246).

Fratricelli,⁷ both of whom viewed the Pope as either Antichrist or a forerunner of Antichrist. This is a modification of Tertullian's earlier idea that the Antichrist would unite the ten kingdoms into which the Roman empire would fall. The Spiritual Franciscans and the Fraticelli saw this union in the domination of the church over Europe. Wycliffe, Huss and Luther also identified the Pope as Antichrist and the identification became part of the Westminster Confession of which more in the next chapter. Enshrined in the Confession the tradition has remained strong and even today there are exegetes who identify the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet and sitting upon a scarlet beast (Rev. 17:3-4) with the Roman Catholic Church.⁸ However, a more moderate view among those contemporary interpreters who still explore such prophecies is to see the Antichrist as either a personification of evil or as a single person who will usher in a time of persecution.

⁷ A group of Franciscans who opposed Pope John XXII over the issue of poverty. It was William of Ockham's agreement with this group that led to his excommunication. Of course Ockham's influence on Reformed thinking is well documented.

⁸ A central problem with these sorts of schema is their radical historical and cultural limitations. How does the rest of the divided church fit into the picture? Where is the Eastern Orthodox Church? How does one account for a Protestant church as diverse as it is? What role do Third World churches play?

In this way then have John's brief remarks about people who did not believe that Jesus came in the flesh, who denied that Jesus was the messiah, and who denied the Father and the Son, become a tradition which has exercised a profound political and social influence on Western culture and has sought to discover in Biblical passages the prefigurement of persons as widely disparate as Napoleon, Hitler and Gorbachev. As James Allen Patterson of Taccoa Falls College in Georgia has pointed out, such attempts to link prophecy and history poorly serve both disciplines. They are too easily taken captive by political and national agendas, they are too simple-minded in their identification of this or that contemporary person or event with persons or events described in Scripture, and they have always been proven wrong.⁹

We may be forgiven if we view such apocalyptic speculation with suspicion and yet we must remember Carl Jung's admonition that myth is dead if it no longer seems relevant to current circumstances.¹⁰ Whatever its shortcomings the tradition of the Antichrist as a person who

⁹ Patterson, J.A., "Changing Images of the Beast: Apocalyptic Conspiracy Theories in American History", Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Vol. 31, No. 4, Dec. 1988, p. 452.

¹⁰ Jung, C.G., Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Chap. 12, sec. 1, p. 332

plays a key eschatological role has proven to be a myth which has endured and which continues to make certain passages of Scripture seem very relevant to contemporary circumstances. Hence, if we can be forgiven our skepticism, we can also be forgiven for wondering if God, in inspiring such images, might not have had just such an end in view. These applications, after all, do help remind us to watch and wait. We should remember, too, that Jewish Messianic expectations were as questionable scripturally and as dependent upon tradition as are our anti-messianic ones and yet Messiah did come.

CHAPTER 3: The Risk of Faith

In the last chapter we examined how tradition based on speculation can over time be fashioned into an interpretive structure which unites disparate passages to create the impression that the tradition is firmly rooted in Scripture. Once antiquity has given such traditions the stamp of authority, the traditions not only become vehicles for error, they also become the wedges which serve to drive believers apart. Until 1986 Scottish Presbyterianism confessed the Pope as Antichrist and there are still in the United States some churches which do. We may applaud the Scottish Presbyterian church for amending the Westminster Confession but surely we will be forgiven for wondering when the Pope quit being the Antichrist.

However, the implications of the problem are far more serious and far reaching than the question of division within the church, as serious and far reaching as such divisions are. The implications of the problem impact the very concept of orthodoxy itself, the issue of unified truth and of a transcendent ethic or a moral absolute. If truth is defined and modified primarily within the context of historical and cultural contingencies, what claim can it have to ultimacy? And if religious truth

is not ultimate, in what way can it be said to differ from secular probabilism? As with truth so with ethics. To admit that human truth is by its very nature as human only provisional is to admit that ethical norms are fluid. It is not easy to see how Christians can from their divided tradition affirm unified truth and a universal ethic without crucifying both on the cross of a thousand qualifications. And even if one tradition is authentic or more authentic than all the others, how can one demonstrate which tradition it is?

It is a function of plausible alternatives to create uncertainty and to spur debate. One hopes that such debate will resolve the issues raised by the alternatives but often such resolutions are not achieved. When agreement fails, that uncertainty created by the alternatives remains and introduces a secularization process which is deadening to faith. We have already mentioned Mircea Eliade's contention that the fundamental desire of religious people is to know the ultimate, yet it is this desire which pluralism thwarts. To be aware of alternatives, especially when those alternatives are not alternatives to faith but are alternatives proposed from within the faith itself; to be aware of the issues of pluralism, especially when those issues are raised not by unbelievers but by those whose belief is as sincere as one's own, is to be aware that at the very heart of the

tenets one espouses there is ambiguity. But faith rests not upon ambiguity but upon assertions. The man of faith must confess with conviction, otherwise he is lost.

The problem is compounded if one believes that the Spirit of truth is guiding believers into all truth and one believes that such truth is objectifiable, comprehensible and articulable, all tenets of traditional orthodoxy. It is a problem because pluralism suggests deception and deception suggests a deceiver. Hence to confront pluralism within one's faith is to confront the possibility that many who confess have been deceived and that possibly one is one's self among that number. The difficulty cannot be avoided by pretending that other traditions really affirm approximately the same things as one's own. The specific language and precise nature of credal confessions preclude that option.

J.P. Moreland in his recent Christianity and the Nature of Science raises a profound objection to the position that there can be such a thing as approximate truth by pointing out that many disagreements are disagreements not between points within a particular paradigm but are disagreements between paradigms and hence lack a common ground for

comparison.¹ This suggests to him that the history of truth is not a history of development or further refinement of points but rather a history of paradigms succeeding one another.² Such an observation calls into question the proposition that a statement of belief can be approximately truth for statements of belief involve assertions based on paradigms and paradigms are either true or false.³

Of course Dr. Moreland is referring to disputes within the scientific community but his observations hold true for other communities as well. The antagonism created by the Pentecostal movement is a case in point. Rooted in pneumatological themes which emphasized power and which emerged in the revivals of the last century, Pentecostalism believes that the gifts of God are without repentance (meaning that once God has given them God will not take them back), that these gifts are a primary evidence that one is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that one can exercise

¹Moreland, J.P., Christianity and the Nature of Science, Chap. 5 "Alternatives to Scientific Realism," sec. "Kuhn and the Epistemology of Science," pp. 199-200.

² Ibid., Chap. 4 "Scientific Realism," sec. "Criticisms of Rational Realism," pp. 155-159.

³Ibid., Chap. 4, sec. "The Meaning and Reference of Scientific Terms," p. 164; Chap. 5, sec. "Kuhn and the History of Science," pp. 196-198.

these gifts even if one has persistent sin on one's life. Although the pentecostal movement developed from within the holiness churches and although its doctrine of the Spirit is similar to the doctrine as articulated by those churches, the two traditions are radically opposed to one another. The holiness tradition believes that victory over sin, not the exercise of ecstatic gifts, is the primary work of the Spirit and for this reason sees the manifestation of ecstatic gifts without the corresponding victory over sin as the work of a deceiving spirit. To the Pentecostals such an assertion looks very much like blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Also, as Donald W. Dayton points out in his Theological Roots of Pentecostalism, the movement gives subjectivism primacy over an objective hermeneutic.⁵ It is for this reason that the movement draws such intense fire from the fundamentalists who have been the primary champions of an historical-grammatical and hence objective hermeneutic

⁴Matt. 12:31. Background verses are Num. 15:30 and I Sam. 2:25. It seems clear within the context that what Jesus is referring to is ascribing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. Some exegetes, C.C. Ryrie for example (see The Ryrie Study Bible), maintain that such a sin is no longer possible but their reasons for making such an assertion are anything but clear.

⁵Dayton, D.W., Theological Roots of Pentecostalism, Chap. 1 "Toward a Theological Analysis of Pentecostalism," sec. "The Pentecostal Hermeneutic," pp. 23-26.

in this century.⁶

It is very difficult to believe that the holiness movement with its emphasis on moral perfection, the Pentecostal movement with its emphasis on ecstatic gifts, and the fundamentalists with their emphasis on faith as a confession of objective truths believe approximately the same thing about the work of the Holy Spirit. The conflict in their positions lies not only in the nature of that work but in the character of the God who does it and in the nature of truth and ethics.

Thus pluralism within faith, by revealing that faith is in conflict with itself at a variety of fundamental points, undermines the certainty one hopes for. When one confesses, one takes a position and in taking a position one takes a profound risk. By taking a position one is required to defend one's position yet as one defends it one may be forced to modify it and modification can alter one's position until that position is forfeited. The problem then becomes: if one's initial confession must be abandoned, to what extent was the faith one expressed in making that

⁶Conn, H.M. (editor) Inerrancy and Hermeneutic, Ferguson, S.B., Chap. 3 "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?," sec. "The Bible's View of Itself," p. 61; Chap. 13 "Bible Authority: When Christians Do Not Agree," sec. "Issuing Challenges Properly," p. 248.

initial confession a faith in something real? It is at this point that the words of Jesus, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'"⁷ cut very deep indeed.

⁷Matt. 7:21-23. RSV. Recall that Paul tells us that no one says that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:3).

CHAPTER 4: Ethical Relativism

If truth and its meaning and/or significance can be transformed over time, ethics, too, can change. Our ethical climate is much different from the one in which Paul lived. Paul's words about rulers being God's servants for the people's good¹ were written not about democratically elected public officials but about tyrants whose names and titles have today become synonymous with cruelty and excess. Paul accepted slavery as a proper economic and social institution and admonished the believing slave to be dutiful and submissive to his master as unto the Lord.² He even used slavery as a metaphor for the relationship between Jesus and the believer.³ And surely Paul's extensive discussion in I Corinthians as to whether or not a believer can safely eat food that has been offered to idols must seem at least mildly anachronistic to most of us living in the West.

¹Rom. 13:1-7.

²Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-24.

³Rom. 6:16-22 (RSV, NIV, ASV). The KJV uses the word servant but for the nature of what is meant by servant see Luke 17:7-10. Note that what Jesus describes in the Luke passage is an unprofitable servant and for the fate of a unprofitable servant see Matt. 25:30. Paul describes the selflessness that he envisions for those "bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:20; 7:23) in Gal. 1:20. Surely the only thing which mitigates such selfless devotion is the graciousness of the Master to whom one is devoted.

Hippolytus in his Apostolic Tradition which describes church life at the end of the second century argues that actors, teachers and soldiers should not be admitted into the church, actors because they portray the gods and immoral deeds and by their portrayal glorify both, teachers because they instruct their students in the religious traditions of the pagans, and soldiers because they must swear allegiance to an emperor proclaimed by the state to be divine. A woman, however, who is kept as a sex slave can be a member of the church so long as she is not promiscuous but remains faithful to her master, the rationale being that she is not free and hence cannot assume full responsibility for her actions. Hippolytus also describes and approves the practice of baptizing naked believers before a mixed congregation.

During the Middle Ages kings were believed to rule by divine right and interest on investments was considered usury. Indeed, it was Calvin who first recognized that the use of investment capital created a set of economic circumstances in which the old canonical prohibitions against interest did not apply.⁴ It is easy for us who enjoy the benefits of democratic government to forget that those governments trace their origins

⁴Kitch, M.J. (editor), Capitalism and the Reformation, pp. 129-130, excerpt from John Calvin's Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Vol. I, pp. 150-151.

to the pagan Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and to violent revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revolutions which, as Camus reminds us in The Rebel, were, because they were revolts against those who ruled by divine right, also revolts against God.⁵ John and Charles Wesley both appealed to the Bible in denouncing the revolt of the American colonies and the atheism and excesses of the French Revolution, though condemned by the church, are not generally regarded as providing sufficient warrant for rejecting that system of government which that revolution eventually installed. We might view the leaders of the Parisian mobs as wicked, godless men but we believe that their political ideas are worth dying for.

In the light of our cultural development it would seem to be as naive to talk of ethical absolutes as it is to talk of self-evident truth. Ethics, like truth, are culturally interpreted and such interpretations inevitably introduce modification. There is nothing at all self-evident about the proposition that it is morally wrong to keep human beings in bondage so that they can perform labor for a master class, or for any reason for that matter. Its immorality is an admission wrung from its

⁵Camus, A., The Rebel, Part III "Historical Rebellion," Sec. "The Regicides," pp. 112-132.

practitioners on the battlefield and after a century of debate. In fact, when one hears condemnations of slavery begun with descriptions of the cruel slave-owners, one wonders if the full import of our cultural assessment of slavery has yet to be driven home. Surely if slavery is wrong, the cruelty of the slave-owners is irrelevant - unless of course we are expected to believe that slavery is acceptable so long as the slave-owners are decent about it.

The tremendous moral ambiguities of history are driven home in a particularly pointed way when one considers our treatment of the Amerindian population. Surely the actions of our forefathers must outrage every moral tenet we hold dear. Our forefathers invaded Amerindian homelands and decimated Amerindian populations in a series of ruthless wars that because they targeted not only warriors but also women and children, can only be described as genocide. Our forefathers starved the Amerindians over whom conquest had given them authority, cheated them and tried to enslave them. And in the case of the Cherokees in North Carolina our forefathers even chose to ignore the decision of their own Supreme Court, drove the Cherokees into Oklahoma territory, and took as their own land the Court had decided rightfully belonged to the Cherokees. A handful of the European invaders did attempt to bring the

gospel message to the Amerindians but even these few failed to appreciate the full enormity of the crime being committed and from the midst of which they preached.

And yet consider what this evil has achieved. Did not the reality of the New World and the chance that reality offered snap the chains of Europe's lower classes, inspire the largest immigration in history, and set the stage for modern democracy? The world as it exists today bears the fundamental impress of human rights and human values which were forged in and are defended by the United States. The wealth generated by the United States has been poured into scientific research that has transformed the general lot of humanity. And the ideal of individual liberty after which the United States strives has become an ever brightening beacon that inspires the oppressed and threatens the foundations of tyranny everywhere.

What are we to make of the crime and its results? How should we best understand those prayers offered up to the God of mercy for the blessings He has bestowed upon this chosen land? If there was ever an evidence of divine grace transforming sin, surely it is here!

Democracy by its very nature creates a sense of the flexible, variable, relativistic nature of law. We experience the law not as something immutable and decreed by God but as something we ourselves propose and enact for our own purposes and in response to perceived problems. Hence the solutions embodied by the law are always partial, the restrictions always temporary, and the problems addressed by the laws always subject to change. What was prohibited yesterday for reasons which seemed good and sufficient may be allowed tomorrow for reasons equally persuasive and vice versa. In a country as large and diverse as the United States this consciousness of legal relativity is further compounded by the belief that local solutions to local problems generally work best. Hence some towns or counties may prohibit the sale of alcoholic drinks or permit the sale of alcohol only by bulk while others are quite tolerant of public drunkenness or even drinking and driving. Laws regulating marriage and divorce, recreational drug use, building construction, child discipline, fire arms sales and registration, acceptable treatment of animals, gambling, prostitution, homosexuality, abortion, the requirements of an acceptable educational curriculum, the use of tobacco, the extent and level of taxation, pollution and a whole host of other activities, many involving traditional ethical concerns, vary from place to place at the same moment in history in the same country. And in a

society as mobile as ours we experience this variety directly and frequently. All of which conspires against the perception that law is uniform and permanent and judgment consistent. Vox populi, Vox Dei may be true but varium et mutabile semper vox populi. Yet in a society comprised of immigrants drawn from all over the world it is hard to see how things could be much different.

This pluralism points to a profound moral dilemma at the heart of the Christian or post-Christian West. The various cultures which underlie our own have been transformed, though not entirely transformed, by the gospel message. And the gospel message has itself been transformed. It is simply untrue to assert that Christians have always behaved in the same ways, responded to the same passages of Scripture, or believed the same things. We do not even claim an identical Bible or employ the same rituals. And as Christianity has become a global phenomenon, the pluralism that has characterized traditional Christianity has become more pronounced. Christianity is not like a mountain dropped in the midst of and crushing the issues of history. It is more like a tree with many branches which has flowered in the thicket of history, been pollinated by the issues of history, and borne a wide variety of fruits each in its own season. Nurtured by such a tree it is hard to see how Christians could

fail to be comfortable with pluralism but, as we noted in the last chapter, the "perhaps..." of pluralism is antagonistic to the certitude demanded of the devout.

CHAPTER 5: The Spirit of Truth and Pluralism

We have to this point noted that the Christian faith is a faith derived from events believed to have occurred in history and that it bases its doctrines on records of and interpretations of those events. As enshrined in Scripture these records and interpretations are believed to be divinely inspired but they are ancient and written in three languages none of them current. Hence the Bible reflects cultural assumptions very different from our own. It is, as Rudolf Bultmann observed, a very strange book. This strangeness complicates to a considerable degree our role as exegetes and introduces a measure of tentativeness into our conclusions.

We further noted that conclusions can be the source of traditions and that traditions which develop subsequent to a revelation can have a profound impact on later understandings of that revelation and its significance for us even though such traditions may be dubious and may derive from conditions which are themselves quite dissimilar to ours. We pointed out that such dissimilarities often point to paradigm shifts and that paradigm shifts may render points of contact between worldviews speculative. This may require us to employ a different hermeneutic

though to employ a different hermeneutic may well effect the way we understand a passage.¹

We then argued that the historical-cultural nature of the revelation coupled with the overlay of various traditions introduces a secularization process into our formulations about what it is we do believe and that such a secularization process creates a very real risk for those who believe that faith is best expressed as adherence to a set of objective propositions.

And finally we have shown how truth which is culturally relative (as truth derived from events in history and recorded in languages must to some extent be) implies of necessity an ethic which is culturally relative and we have adduced from the history of our culture examples to illustrate that relative ethic.

It is now time to turn to the point we raised in the introduction:

¹The medieval quadriga which attempted to exegete four meanings from Scripture: the literal meaning, the moral meaning, the allegorical meaning, and the anagogical meaning; the grammatico-historical method which became so important during the Renaissance and the Reformation, and the concerns of higher criticism that became so important to nineteenth century liberals are all examples of hermeneutical methods which have reflected paradigm shifts. Each method is quite credible given the philosophical assumptions which underlie it but the results obtained by employing the methods can be radically different.

how are we to understand the role of the Spirit of truth as guiding us into all truth given our own experience of pluralism within the faith and our traditional assumption (based on the unity of God, the expressed desire for unity among believers as articulated by Jesus and Paul, and the importance of credal confessions in the development of our faith) that the truth into which we are being guided is one truth?

We can begin by pointing out that when the Spirit of truth came in Jerusalem at Pentecost, the manifestation of that Spirit's arrival was the proclamation of the deeds of God in a variety of languages.² This observation points to two key elements in the problem we have been discussing: particular historical events (the deeds of God) and a variety of languages to proclaim those events. Part of the significance revealed by Pentecost lies in what is implied about the nature of language. First, we may assume that the same events can be proclaimed in a variety of languages and this implies that Scripture can be translated. The Jews were by no means united in assuming that the Hebrew scriptures could be rendered into the languages of the gentiles and retain their purity and value as vehicles of revelation and when Greek translations were begun in Alexandria some of the religious leaders in Jerusalem went into

²Acts 2:5-11.

mourning. Muslims, too, have never agreed on an authoritative translation of the Qur'an. It was revealed in Arabic and in Arabic it should be read. But Christians, based on the experience at Pentecost, have affirmed that the deeds of God can be proclaimed in the languages of every nation under heaven and in order to facilitate that proclamation they have translated the Scriptures. Because Latin became the lingua franca of Medieval Europe the Western Church lost sight of this truth but one of the enduring fruits of the Reformation has been the effort to translate the Bible into every contemporary tongue in order to make the Bible accessible to everyone who can read. Hence, from the moment of Pentecost the Spirit of truth not only introduces the problem of pluralism (many languages were used), the Spirit also reveals that language is the vehicle he will use to guide us into truth (truth understood as a knowledge of the deeds of God and their significance, meaning that saving truth has a definite objective focus). We can infer then that the Spirit blesses language although it is an instrument of pluralism. This blessing makes good theological sense in light of the role of the word in the divine economy. We often speak of the word of God. Jesus, we say, is the Word of God made flesh. The Bible, we say, is the written word of God. We hear God's word in the preacher's exhortation. And, as Luther pointed out in his commentary on Genesis, we may even think of

creation as being the word of God since God spoke creation into existence. Of course this is pluralism with a focus: the languages were used to proclaim specific acts of a single God who demands exclusive devotion and who is knowable, but it is pluralism none the less.

It is worth pointing out here that, given the factors created by cultural relativity, belief systems based on actual events in history are far more resilient than are those based on a set of principles. The deed endures but principles can become irrelevant or can be transformed into other principles. If we view the Old Testament law as having been given by God on Mount Sinai at a certain time and for specific reasons, then that law has a much more permanent significance than it does if we understand the story as a creation of Jewish tradition told to give divine sanction to principles and practices the Jews had discovered for themselves during the course of their experience. In the same way, if Christ did the miracles described in the gospel, they tell us something far different about the nature of reality and the power of God than they tell us if the miracle stories were simply made up by the apostles as they attempted to elucidate the significance of what they believed they had seen in Jesus. Myths, as Carl Jung reminded us, are dead when they no longer seem relevant to current circumstances but events, even though

their significance may change, remain significant for the very fact of their having occurred. The move among so many modern theologians to view the Bible primarily as a source of symbols instructing us in principles which have universal truth and significance seems untrue to the nature of symbols and radically limits the trans-cultural adaptability of the gospel.³

We would seem to have a situation where the deeds of God, if they occurred as described in the Bible, allow for shifts in significance and we would seem to have some warrant for assuming that the Spirit of truth blesses such a situation. We should recall here that Christianity is not a revelation of truth per se, it is a revelation of the way to salvation. As a consequence, it tells us some things about human need and God's nature and requirements and about our place in God's creation but these are theological truths with a particular focus: Jesus Christ who remains the sole mediator of salvation. Our awareness of Jesus and his role, our awareness of our significance and our need, our awareness of our place in history and/or creation, may change in many consequential ways but Jesus as the invader of and guide of our history and Jesus as the creator

³Religions of law like Judaism or Islam have proven far less culturally flexible than has Christianity which is a religion of the miraculous or Buddhism which is a religion of subjective awareness. It is their emphasis on practice which creates the cultural rigidity of legalistic faiths.

of and invader of our world remains the fixed point around which that changing understanding revolves. However, he remains fixed only because he came into our realm at a particular place and time and in a particular way and did specific things. Jesus as act confronts us perennially across all cultures; Jesus as symbol evolves as does not.

God's revelation of himself has varied over time and across cultures. There is the revelation of God in the universe he created, the revelation of God in the experience of Israel, the revelation of God in Jesus, the revelation of God at Pentecost, the revelation of God in the church, and personal revelations which constantly lead sinners to confessions of faith or admonish and encourage those sinners already in the faith. God's demands, too, have changed. The requirement of circumcision, the requirement of animal sacrifice, the selection of Saturday as a day of rest, have all been transcended. The God who clothed Adam and Eve in animal skins is the same God who commanded Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years as a sign to Israel. The God who made a covenant with Israel under the terms of the law is the same God who makes a covenant with all believers under terms now defined by Jesus. The God who cursed the earth for Adam's sake is the same God who will redeem the earth for his own sake. God's purposes are constant

but his means for achieving those purposes have changed as circumstances in which God is providentially involved changed. It would seem, then, that constancy amid change is a fundamental characteristic of the truth of God and would be, as a consequence, an appropriate expression of the Spirit of truth, especially if that spirit has blessed and uses languages and God's acts in history.

CHAPTER 6: Nonlinear Systems: Constancy Amid Change

Let us now return to Luther's perception (referred to in the last chapter) that the created order is the word of God and to the claims that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the word of God and that the church is his body. If the natural order is the creation of God and is intended by God to reveal certain aspects of God, if that creating God has inspired a body of literature which is also intended by God to reveal to human beings a special type of information about God and about human beings, and if that creating God has also established a community of believers which has endured over several thousand years and spread to all parts of the world and whose purpose is, at least in part, to proclaim and interpret the deeds of God in all human languages, then we should expect to find some correspondence between the truth about God revealed in the natural order, the truth about God revealed in the Bible, and the truth about God proclaimed and interpreted by the community. We would not expect the truths about God revealed in these different ways to contradict one another.

For example, if the natural order was static, we might expect truth statements about God revealed by the natural order to be static and

equally applicable at all places and at all times. We might expect the truth statements about God revealed in the inspired body of literature to be elucidated by a single interpretation (if indeed such truth statements needed any explication at all) and to be equally applicable at all times and in all places. And we might expect the believing community to hand down a tradition that was unchanging. On the other hand, if the natural order was dynamic, we might expect truth statements about God revealed by the natural order to be qualified and subject to revision even though the statements might prove accurate within a limited context. We might expect a dynamic development in the body of inspired literature, a variety of traditions springing from that literature, and a believing community that expressed a wide variety of opinions about the essential nature of the truth entrusted to it and about the significance of that truth. What would be difficult to account for, given our initial assumptions, would be a dynamic natural order and a static body of literature expressing static truths or a static natural order and a dynamic body of literature expressing dynamic truths.

In fact, the perception that truth can embody both constancy and change finds its verification in the natural order. We are quite comfortable with probability statements about the behavior of systems

within the natural order. However, to have arrived at the point where we believe that the universe is best explained by probability statements is to have admitted that earlier assessments of truth as it was conceived within our culture were probably wrong. In classical antiquity the natural order was viewed as having an essentially static existence. It was thought to be the expression of an interplay of unchanging forms (either transcendent or immanent) which perpetually brought order from chaos. But though there was some appearance of change in this interplay of forms and their imposition on chaos, the order itself never varied because the forms themselves were eternal and immutable. Hence, genuine truth was immutable and eternal while change was superficial and/or a corruption. The development of orthodoxy in the early church reflected this assumption. The revelation was a revelation of immutable truth: God is changeless and therefore truth statements about God are changeless. Change was viewed as a movement toward death and hence as an expression of God's judgment on corruption. The program that inspired orthodoxy was the preservation and accurate transmission of truth. Of course cultures and languages varied but such variations expressed either pagan assumptions or as in the case of language the judgment of God. But as Jesus the carpenter redeemed labor so Jesus the incarnate Word redeemed languages and Jesus the Galilean redeemed culture. Therefore,

insofar as cultures and languages could be used to proclaim and elucidate immutable truth about a changeless God, early Christian missionaries believed that they could adapt their gospel message to the language and culture of their hearers. Like Paul, they tried to become all things to all men in the hope that they might thereby save some. But salvation was still believed to consist of assent to certain truths about God and humanity and of membership in a universal church with a single calendar. Conformity of sacred days and the identification of and search for heresy was a primary concern for the church in spite of such cultural adaptations.

Within this context the church developed a doctrine of implied assent. For the laity membership in the church and participation in the rituals of the church were sufficient for salvation. One did not need to be able to clearly articulate or even understand all the doctrines of the church and the reasons for affirming them. Membership in the body and participation in the rituals were taken as assent and unless one directly challenged a specific doctrine such implied assent was all that was necessary.

After the Reformation, however, such implied assent was no longer sufficient, especially for those who followed in the tradition of the

Reformers. Because the church, in their opinion, had erred, the responsibility to make personal determinations about doctrine devolved to the believer. Such convictions were hard won and not abandoned easily. This development coupled with that rise in cultural nationalism which was a legacy of the Renaissance and which began the movement toward the establishment of national churches, encouraged the rise and institutionalization of dissent. Like-minded people tended to group together to encourage one another in their personal versions of the faith. Intolerance, controversy, denominationalism and even martyrdom became the order of the day. Only after a century of internecine religious warfare did Europeans learn the value of greater ideological liberality but the damage had been extensive and the tendency in reaction to intolerance was toward permissiveness. The revivals of the eighteenth century, revivals which further fragmented the church, were a reaction to this slide toward permissiveness. The Protestant missionary movement inspired by those revivals has through its success compounded that division by establishing a vital third world church. In fact, the very division in the church which would appear to create a problem when contrasted with the apparent intent of Jesus and Paul witness to the vitality and success of the church.

The situation seems less ironic if we realize that such pluralism can find its counterpart in the natural order. The problem is not the nature of truth but our expectations about the nature of truth, expectations which are a heritage of the classical world and which reflect a perception of reality we know today to be less than adequate. The universe would appear to be far more dynamic or chaotic than our ancestors suspected. In light of this new appreciation of the essentially kinetic character of natural phenomenon, a strictly linear approach to truth seems unnecessarily abstractive and confining and even anachronistic.

In the contemporary scientific community there is a great deal of interest in modeling nonlinear systems, that is systems which develop in complex ways from a set of initial conditions.¹ It has long been an assumption in Western science that approximate measurements producing approximate results are sufficient for predicting how systems will behave. Differential equations, that is equations with one or more differential coefficients, are used to graph linear systems and project their development. However, such ideal linear systems are exceptions in the

¹Grebogi, C., Ott, E., Yorke, J.A., "Chaos, Strange Attractors, and Fractal Basin Boundaries in Nonlinear Dynamics," Science, Vol. 238, Oct. 30, 1987, pp. 632-633.
Cipra, B.A., "Computer-Drawn Pictures Stalk the Wild Trajectory," Science, Vol. 241, Sept. 2, 1988, pp. 1162-1163

real world. In the real world it is nonlinearity which constitutes the rule.² In nonlinear systems approximate measurements do not allow one to predict developments because in nonlinear systems approximation equals uncertainty and such systems multiply uncertainty because they never achieve a steady-state where they can exactly replicate themselves. Approximation requires such a steady-state to make it effective.³

Nonlinear or aperiodic systems are the source of that great variety which characterizes our world. Such dynamic systems magnify small changes, acting creatively to generate a labyrinth of related yet distinct detail. Economists, meteorologists, biologists, physicists and mathematicians are having greater and greater success modeling the process by which simple nonlinear systems produce complexity. They have found that within aperiodic systems there is a geometric convergence or scaling that obeys certain mathematically expressible laws which are universal, laws that can be applied to all scaling systems regardless of the

²Devaney, R.L., "Chaotic Bursts in Nonlinear Dynamical Systems," Science, Vol. 235, Jan. 16, 1987, pp. 342-345.

Gleick, J., Chaos, Chap. 3, "Life's Ups and Downs," p. 68.

³Gleick, J., Chaos, Chap. 1, "The Butterfly Effect," pp. 15, 20 and 23.

specific details which make up the system.⁴ Variations across such systems occur but occur in accordance to rules. The extremes are directly related to the mean. Similarity continues across the scale but scaling over time can produce in an ordered way patterns which are completely different from one another, so different in fact that an observer who saw the patterns in isolation from one another might easily believe that they were creations not of a single system but of different systems.

Here, it seems to me, in the phenomenon of nonlinear systems, we have a model which may prove very helpful in furthering our understanding of what is transpiring in the doctrinal life of the church. The deeds of God have established a set of initial conditions from which ideas about God and the divine-human relationship develop. Language being imprecise and culturally relative is analogous to the approximate measurements of the empirical sciences. And the variety generated by aperiodic systems finds its counterpart in the variety of speculative theologies that have emerged over the centuries as the Christian message has spread from culture to culture.

⁴*Ibid.*, Chap. 4, "A Geometry of Nature," pp. 103, 108, Chap. 6 "Universality," pp. 172, 175, 186.

In the next chapter we will discuss the counterintuitive quality of the gospel and the implications the gospel message has for evolutionary paradigms.

CHAPTER 7: The God of Surprises

In the last chapter we showed how a shift in contemporary science toward an interest in aperiodic systems was revealing a cosmos where change based on scaling or geometric convergence fueled that creativity which characterizes our cosmos and that such scaling is universal. Indeed, James Gleick quotes Mitchell Feigenbaum, a physicist and one of the early pioneers of chaos theory, as saying that only scaling things can be universal.¹ Hence, since we assume the logos to be universal, we may assume that the logos acts as a scaling thing, that the logos expresses truth in terms that are fractal rather than linear.² This would suggest that the logos, remaining true to his essential nature, could produce results which seemed counterintuitive to us. And this would suggest that evolutionary models are more nearly accurate for apprehending the nature of truth than are static models and that the predominance of aperiodic systems in the world witnesses to that point. It is usual for conservative

¹Gleick, J., Chaos, Chap. 6 "Universality," p. 186.

²Fractal is a word coined by Benoit Mandelbrot to suggest the concept of fracture or breakage (Gleick, Chap. 4 "A Geometry of Nature," p. 98) and is defined in a paper "Chaos, Strange Attractors, and Fractal Basin Boundaries in Nonlinear Dynamics" appearing in Science, Vol. 238, Oct. 30, 1987, and authored by Celso Grebogi, Edward Ott, and James A. Yorke as expressing a system which develops not in a closed curve but irregularly and the dimensions of which are not expressed in integers (p. 632).

Protestants to admit the validity of relativity as a theory of physics but to deny the validity of evolution as a theory of biology. However, such a position reveals a profound misunderstanding about the relatedness of the two concepts for relativity philosophically is the state of being dependent for existence or determined in nature, value, or some other quality by relation to something else and relativity theory in physics is simply a pan-mathematical concept for expressing this kind of relatedness. Evolutionary theory expresses the same concept in biology. In fact, the two ideas which were developed within two generations of one another (with some overlap and with evolutionary theory generally anticipating relativity theory) were natural expressions of the same Western cultural milieu.

The two ideas have emerged together over the centuries as implications of the Christian (and to a lesser extent the Jewish) revelation have been worked out. James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) was deeply influenced by his Christian trinitarian convictions as he worked out his equations (now known as Maxwell's equations) describing electromagnetic interactions and predicting that charged particles should produce electromagnetic waves. And of course Maxwell's equations opened the way for Einstein's.

Evolutionary theory, too, emerges from the implications of Christian theology. Carl Sagan in his The Dragons of Eden mentions the similarity between biology and history.³ James Gleick in Chaos talks of teleology in Darwinism.⁴ Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time is unabashed in dealing with religious issues and even has two favorable references to Augustine.⁵ Indeed, the evolutionary implications of Augustine's thought are so well established that the December 1989 issue of the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society had two articles discussing the question.⁶ In fact, evolution derives from and is a re-interpretation of the Christian doctrine of providence. As such it is myth in the technical sense of the

³Sagan, C., The Dragons of Eden, "Introduction," p. 6.

⁴Gleick, J., Chaos, Chap. 7 "The Experimenter," p. 201.

⁵Hawking, S., A Brief History of Time, Chap. 1 "Our Picture of the Universe," pp. 7-8.

⁶Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Vol. 32, No. 4, December 1989. Lewis, J.P. "The Days of Creation: An Historical Survey of Interpretation," pp. 433-455, and Lavalley, L., "Augustine on the Creation Days," pp. 457-464. Lavalley concludes by arguing that although evolutionists have sought to show how their ideas are implicit in Augustine's, Augustine himself argued against such an application of his thought. However, Lavalley's caveat seems ill-considered. Augustine accepted Cyprian's view that apart from the church and its sacramental system there is no salvation but Augustine's view of salvation as a free gift of God appropriated by belief implicitly contradicts Cyprian. The Reformers could claim Augustine as one with them only by developing what was implicit rather than what was explicit in Augustine's thought. What worked for the Reformers, it seems to me, can work as well for the evolutionists.

term.⁷ When biology becomes history with a teleological focus, the inquiry inevitably turns religious.

It was Augustine in his City of God who first realized that if the statement that Christ died once for all was true, then the event described in that statement had profound implications for our concept of time. Augustine argued that such an event had cosmic consequences yet it had occurred within history and it was unique. If a unique and truly cosmic event could happen in history, then history could not be repeating itself, it could not be modeled cyclically. History must be linear.⁸ Augustine went on to observe that the elimination of cycles in history allowed for new possibilities. Human beings were no longer trapped in endlessly repeating cycles of changeless change. Hence, genuine development could

⁷Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in the Preface to Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time refer to Einstein's concept of space/time as a pure pan-mathematical myth (p. vi). When Sigmund Freud wrote Totem and Tabu (1913) he believed that his speculations about the primal murder would be verified as anthropologists amassed more detail about early human development. That verification for his theory did not appear was a disappointment to Freud but he did not consider the absence of such detail to be an insurmountable obstacle to the theory for, he observed, the psychological reality of his patients could still be explained as though the primal murder had occurred. For Freud then Totem and Tabu moved from the realm of scientific hypothesis to the realm of technical myth. This tendency of science to develop toward myth has profound cultural ramifications.

⁸Augustine, City of God, Book XII, Chap. 14.

occur.⁹ He touches on the biological implications of this only briefly when, after describing the various types of humanity, he observes that despite the differences we should not doubt that they all developed from the same original couple.¹⁰

We might argue that the idea of static nature and changeless species (species as we have now come to conceive the term being traced to C. Linneaus) is of pagan origin.¹¹ It has been forced over the Biblical phrase that each kind (and kind is not necessarily species as we think of species) shall bring forth after its kind. For kind to bring forth after its kind is not unavoidably at variance with the proposition that change can occur. Languages, cultures, societies, natural systems, and species might all express an inner dynamic toward aperiodicity within an outward structuring of forces and yet allow for the proposition that kind brings forth after its kind. It depends in part on how one defines kind and in part on the recognition that scaling can produce from a single system

⁹Ibid., Chap. 21.

¹⁰Ibid., Book XVI, Chap. 8.

¹¹I do not mean to assert here that the idea of a development of types was completely unknown to Greek thinkers but Richard H. Overman in his Evolution and the Christian Doctrine of Creation argues persuasively that it is a mistake to read into early Greek concepts too much from our current ideas.

patterns which may appear completely different from one another. Augustine glimpsed the process and the Christian doctrine of providence gives it coherence.

The revelation suggests several things to us in this regard. First, it suggests that time had a beginning and may well have an end. Second, it suggests intentionality in the created order as conflict guided and shaped by God leads events toward a preordained culmination. Third, it suggests that tragedy is alien to creation since events (even including rebellion against God) can be guided toward an end which expresses God's goodness and glory. Finally, it suggests that God works through the limitations imposed upon God by the created order. Hence, creation by having a reality external to God in some way limits God.

Within the limits imposed by a natural order which is characterized by becomingness God acts creatively which means that when God acts we are often surprised by what God does. Linear thought as it has come to be structured since Newton is like the iron law of Blake's Urizen: it implies the absence of surprise. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. What precision! What clarity! And how deadly dull! But the Bible, a record of and interpretation of some of the deeds of God,

is full of stories that surprise us. If we fail to see how they challenge the neat linearity of theological models based on cause and effect - sin and die, repent and live - it is only because we have become so familiar with them that we have ceased to hear what they say.

I will refer to four stories to illustrate my point. First, let us consider the story in Genesis 3. The man and the woman (Adam whom God created male and female: Gen. 5:2), tempted by the serpent, have sinned. God has told them (Gen. 2:17) that in the day they disobey him and eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they will die. The serpent has told them (Gen. 3:4-5) that they will not die but will become like God knowing good and evil. And the serpent tells the truth. The man and woman do not die. Instead the woman's pain is multiplied in childbearing and her husband rules over her, the ground is cursed for man's sake, and God himself admits that they have become like him knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:22). Those who would assert that the man and woman did in the end die would do well to recall the words which Jesus told the astonished crowd, that God is not the God of the dead but of the living.¹² Insofar as a process of death can be said to begin, it begins when the couple is separated from the tree of life. But

¹²Matt. 22:32; Mk. 12:27; Lk. 20:38; see, too, Romans 14:9.

the process of redemption which will substitute the city of God for the garden of God and return the tree of life via the cross of Christ is also begun and God uses the couple's sin to reveal not the harshness of his judgment but the greatness of his generosity and compassion. To see this story solely in linear terms of cause and effect, sin and die, is to miss the point entirely.

The story of Joseph at the end of Genesis provides us with an even more startling example. Joseph, the youngest among his brothers is told in two dreams (that the dream occurs twice suggests that it expresses purposes fixed in the mind of God - Gen. 41:32) that his brothers will pay him homage. This provokes jealousy in his brothers causing them to betray him into slavery. But it is this very act of betrayal that God uses to bring the entire family into Egypt to escape the famine God himself causes and to change the social and economic structure of Egypt. Later the presence of the Jews in Egypt is the occasion God uses to reveal himself to the Egyptians in signs and wonders. As Joseph tells his brothers who had betrayed him, "... God sent me before you to preserve life ... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth ... it was not you who sent me here but God." (Gen. 45:5-8). And at the death of Jacob, Joseph reassures his brothers again saying, "Fear not

... you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive ... So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." (Gen. 50:19-20). The sin of the brothers, committed for the most selfish of reasons: jealousy, and causing such initial and prolonged suffering, was through the providence of God the occasion of great blessing in which the brothers themselves were participants. Indeed, Jacob when blessing them does not even refer to their crime. And the entire process, beginning with the dreams, was instigated and guided by God. Surely those who believe in a simple world of cause and effect, sin and die, must be astonished by this story.

In many respects the story of Joseph is a prototype of the Christ event¹³ and in fact the life of Jesus abounds in such surprises. Consider Jesus' response to the woman who came to him while he ate at Simon the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50). The woman is a great sinner. Yet it is the depth of her sin that enables her to love Jesus and it is she who Jesus blesses. In a world of cause and effect, sin and die, should we not expect Jesus to say to Simon words like this, "Simon, you see this poor base woman who weeps at my feet. All her life this spiritually poor

¹³Note in this regard the historical peculiarity that Joseph was the name of Mary's husband and that this peculiarity causes us to immediately remember the story of Joseph in Genesis.

creature has done as she would with no thought for the commands of God. You, on the other hand, have done your best to honor and obey the law. You have spent a great deal of time and effort studying it and trying to understand its meaning. You have greatly inconvenienced yourself on many occasions in your efforts to live up to its demands. Also you have invited me in to eat with you and have wisely tested me to see what sort of teacher I am. But this woman has done none of these things. Now she comes forward with nothing but her tears and dares to hope that I might comfort her. But it is you, Simon, who I have come to praise and not this rebellious woman who has done nothing and because she has done nothing must lose all." But instead Jesus tells Simon an amazing thing. He tells Simon that the woman loves him more than Simon does or can because she has sinned more than Simon has and her great love grows from her great sin! What else, after all, could be the point of the story Jesus tells Simon about the two debtors? And he forgives the woman and sends her away with a blessing. What has happened here to the cause and effect of sin is death that we should expect? And if belief is a gift from God as Ephesians 2:8 suggests, what are we to make of Jesus' statement that the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and the Pharisees (Matt. 21:31-32)? Does this not turn the history of Israel and the lessons in

righteousness one would expect that history to teach on its head?

Or consider finally the parable of the Pharisee and the publican who went into the temple to pray (Luke 18:10-14). The Pharisee is by all accounts a good man, a man any church would be proud to have enrolled among its members. He fasts twice a week and gives tithes of all he possesses. He is not an extortioner or an adulterer. He does not squeeze taxes from an oppressed people for the sake of their oppressors. He is not unjust. And in the tradition of genuine spirituality he does not even take credit for his virtues. Instead he thanks God for them. He humbly acknowledges that the source of his righteousness is not himself but God. The publican, who made his living cooperating with the oppressors of Israel and who was a great sinner, simply asks for mercy. He doesn't even promise to quit being a publican. And yet it is he and not the Pharisee who leaves justified. It is a tribute to how completely we misunderstand the parable when we realize that most of us expect the justified publican to return to the temple next week and pray the prayer of the Pharisee!

CHAPTER 8: The Holy God

The God who creates and who continues to guide his creation that he might achieve his purposes within creation is also a holy God and a God who demands holiness from his followers. Holiness is a condition that is absolute while truth and ethics, as I have argued, are culturally relative. How then are we to relate holiness to the Christian life, given the absolute nature of holiness, in light of our apprehension of truth and ethics as relative?

To act in a moral way is to act in a way that is ethically right and proper. One acts intentionally to achieve an end which is principled, upright, virtuous. But contingencies quite beyond one's control can frustrate one's efforts to achieve the ethically good. Furthermore, one's own motivations may seem highminded to one's self but may in fact be expressions of desires that are less than noble. The problem that we face then when we attempt to do good is a two-fold problem. On the one hand, events may conspire to frustrate our intentions (this is the problem of change). On the other hand, we ourselves may be deceived as to the true nature of our intentions (this is the problem posed by corruption or original sin).

An awareness of the dilemma created by these two problems can produce the paralysis of fatalism but if one believes that one has or has been given some degree of mastery over one's desires and one believes that behind the circumstances of change there is a person or principle that must over time achieve genuine good and that one may by one's actions participate in that achievement, then the problems creating the dilemma are in some measure resolved and one has hope. Religion and its secular counterparts like Marxism¹ provide their adherents with just such a hope.

The Western religious tradition is structured by the idea of an eschaton, a resolution of events or the restoration of an ideal state whereby an enduring good is achieved. The eschaton is the culmination of God's purposes. The God who achieves his purposes can communicate his intentions whether through the Old Testament law and prophets, the person of Jesus Christ, or the Qur'an. Because God is conceived as most powerful, all-knowing and acting with intentions, the future is believed to be secured in his necessary triumph. There is then in the West a strong

¹Marxism is a theory of history that derives from the Christian view of time. For an arresting analysis of its religious function I refer the reader to James Thrower's essay "Marxism-Leninism as the Civil Religion of Soviet Society" (pp. 155-163) in Essays in Religious Studies for Andrew Walls, Department of Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, 1986, edited by James Thrower.

affirmation of a teleological good. There is also a strong affirmation that humanity and God are for the moment adversaries and this adversarial relationship which is unnatural causes suffering, certainly for people and possibly for God.² Hence there is in the West as well a strong affirmation that suffering, because it is an evidence of spiritual alienation, has meaning and, because it has meaning, can be borne creatively.

Within these related concepts of change and suffering there are possible three distinct syntheses for achieving moral action: the aesthetic synthesis, the rational synthesis, and the ethical synthesis.

The aesthetic synthesis involves the idea of the hero or heroine who by courageous action transcends the ambiguities of particular existence, foils fate, and in the end achieves a semi-divinity. The heroic act, often entailing some kind of renunciation, is self-transcending and hence beautiful. The tension in the aesthetic synthesis is between courage

²The claim that the suffering of Christ caused suffering in God goes back to the second and third centuries and was made by Theodotus of Byzantium, Paul of Samosta, Noetus, Praxeas, and Sabellius. It was opposed by Tertullian in North Africa and Hippolytus in Rome. Termed patripassianism by Tertullian, the position was condemned by the church generally. However, the position in a new form has been resurrected by Kazoh Kitamori of the Tokyo Theological Seminary who in 1946 published Theology of the Pain of God. This book has had a wide influence both in the West and in developing theologies in Asia.

and cowardice. This is the sort of synthesis celebrated in the pagan epic or in Jewish books like Esther or Judith.

The rational synthesis attempts to structure change by achieving a knowledge of transcendent realities which are beyond change and then wisely applying the principles expressed by those realities within the conditions of change. The good is an expression of enlightened self-interest and is often pleasurable.³ For the rational synthesis the tension exists between knowledge and ignorance. Exemplars would include the pagan Parmenides and the Jew Philo.

The ethical synthesis is an attempt to achieve unity through obedience to precepts which are universal and which have their origin in that which is beyond change. The good here, as with the rational synthesis, is an expression of enlightened self-interest. For the ethical synthesis the tension lies between obedience and disobedience. This position is characteristic of the Stoics and the Pharisees.

Christianity has employed all three of these syntheses. The life of

³For an excellent presentation of this type of synthesis see Albert Plé's Duty or Pleasure?, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell and published by Paragon House in 1987.

Jesus has many parallels to the aesthetic synthesis. He calls his followers to courageous action and promises them victory, honor, and semi-divinity in the eschaton.⁴ This is possible because of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished.

The claims inherent in the Christian faith, that the logos who gathers all things to himself is a person of like passions as ourselves yet without sin and who had been manifested as a particular being in time, are staggering. As Christianity spread, Christians began to enter into dialogue with the educated world and even won converts from among the various schools of philosophers. This dialogue soon made it apparent that a proper belief about Jesus was a central concern in maintaining the integrity of the faith and this concern led to attempts to define Christian claims more precisely and to structure Christian faith in rational terms.

As a development from Judaism Christianity inherited a strong ethical sense. Jesus had not sinned and his followers were to emulate him in this as well as in other particulars. The early apologists for the

⁴The use of the word "semi-divinity" might be challenged. I am using it with reference to images of believers being glorified, judging angels and the world (I Cor. 6:2-3), and feasting with the Lamb (reminiscent of Hercules feasting with the gods).

faith stressed the moral superiority of Christianity over paganism. As the church in articulating its position began to rely more heavily on Neo-Platonic thought forms, this Hebraic legalism began to be focused in the belief that moral perfection if achieved could be rewarded by a vision of God in this life. In order to facilitate such perfection Christians began to establish communities where the believer could find seclusion from the world. This monastic spirit has continued to exercise a major influence on Christian thinking right down to the present. The idea gendered by this spirit can be expressed as follows: before I was a Christian I was immoral but since I have professed Christianity I have begun to behave morally. Christianity so expressed becomes a conversion to moral living through the power of Christ Jesus. At this juncture an equation between morality and holiness is established. It is this equation which I would like to explore.

It seems to me that this equation is grounded upon a fundamental misapprehension about the nature of our lives as human beings. It would seem to me to be more accurate to say that we are to live morally because we are in community and because such behavior is necessary if community life is to be successful. Morality is a requirement of our humanity and not our Christianity. Many belief systems both religious

and secular provide their adherents with a moral system but only Christianity can provide its adherents with a saving relationship to God and holiness is an expression of this saving relationship. As such Christian holiness has an eschatological focus: Christians have been set apart for eternal fellowship with Christ, a fellowship which begins at conversion but which will be enjoyed fully only after the final restoration.

In this world of uncertainty and change Christians are to make choices based upon their awareness that they have already been set apart by the Spirit of truth to have eternal communion with God. Hence Christian life at its most authentic is the celebration of a gift. Nonbelievers may celebrate much about God (or the absence of God) but they do not celebrate their status as the recipients of this gift. Yet believers and nonbelievers must live together in the larger society, answerable to the same laws, making many of the same assumptions about the nature of reality.

How then should we best understand holiness among believers? The English word "holy" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "hálig" which is akin to the Anglo-Saxon word "hál" meaning whole or well. Given its cultural context the English word "holy" suggests a restoration

to an original perfection. It implies that the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith is in some sense already complete. We have been made perfect. Since morality is always expressed in action, such an implication about our status would suggest that believers should act perfectly. But it would also suggest that believers should be perfect in other ways, in their thoughts, in their health, in their love relationships, etc. But of course this is not true. Believers often misconceive, become ill, are impatient, or commit sins. Either we lose our holiness when this happens or else holiness does not imply the completion that the Anglo-Saxon "hálig" suggests.

The word "sacred" which means to set apart or to dedicate comes closer to the Hebrew idea of holiness than does the Anglo-Saxon idea of wholeness. For the Hebrews, that which is separated to the Lord is holy.⁵ God who calls his own from among the peoples of the world is the source of holiness in this sense. Holiness is not a natural condition as wholeness could be but instead is invested in an object, in a person, in a place by God's presence.⁶ On occasion to have merely presented an

⁵Lev. 11:44-45.

⁶Exo. 31:13; 33:15-16.

object before the Lord is sufficient to make it holy.⁷ Holiness is a power or dynamic condition that can be conveyed to the unholy by contact with offerings⁸ but which holy objects can lose by contact with that which is unholy.⁹ The temple had a holy of holies and there were other recognized levels of holiness as well.¹⁰ Holiness is both absolute and dynamic and because it is not a natural condition it must constantly be renewed. Holiness is a condition, morality is action. Holiness has its source in God, morality is determined in accordance to one's adherence to culturally conditioned codes. This is true even under the Mosaic covenant where obedience to the law is evidence of the people's agreement to the terms by which they had already been made holy. It is also true under the Christian covenant with the exception that under the Christian covenant faith in Jesus as the redeeming Lord rather than obedience to the law is the evidence of one's status as having already been made holy.

In the account of the creation in Genesis human beings and beasts

⁷Num. 16:38; 18:9.

⁸Lev. 6:18 and 32.

⁹Haggi 2:11-13.

¹⁰I Kngs. 6:19; 8:6; I Chro. 6:49; as did the tabernacle: Exo. 26:33. See, too, Num. 18:29.

are referred to by the same Hebrew phrase: nephesh ruach. The Greek word psyché and the Latin word anima refer not to that peculiar personality which expresses the essential personality of each individual but refers instead to a vitalizing life principle. The word "animation" captures the concept more accurately than does the word "soul." The Hebrew word nephesh means psyché or anima in the sense of animating life principle. The Hebrew word ruach means breath or wind. The phrase nephesh ruach expresses the idea of an animated being that breathes. In the Genesis account it is translated as "living creature" when referring to animals (Gen. 1:24) and as "living being" when referring to humans (Gen. 2:7) but the phrase in either case is the same: nephesh ruach. In fact, the writer of Ecclesiastes laments that men and beasts have one breath and that men are beasts for what befalls one befalls the other (Ecc. 3:18-22). But Paul develops this concept somewhat differently in I Corinthians 15:42-58.

In that passage which is the summation to his letter addressing the question "how shall we live?" Paul contrasts the man of dust and the man of heaven. Paul views the issues raised by the Corinthian church as issues expressing a very clear set of opposites: spiritual and natural.

the wisdom of God the wisdom of the world (I Cor. 1:20-25)

the power of God	the wisdom of men (I Cor. 2:1-5)
the Spirit of God	the spirit of the world (I Cor. 2:10-13)
the spiritual man	the unspiritual man (I Cor. 2:14-16)
the man of heaven	the man of dust (I Cor. 15:42-58)

In Paul's mind there is a very clear tension between the freedom which as the children of God the Corinthians are supposed to enjoy (Rom. 8:12-21) and the obligations by which as men of the flesh they are constrained (I Cor. 10:23-24). They are addressed as saints and as brothers in Christ and their spiritual gifts testify to their status. On the other hand, they are fleshly in their understanding, like Paul they see through a glass darkly (I Cor. 13:12), and Paul gives them moral advice, that is he admonishes them as beloved children (I Cor. 4:14).

What Paul does by making this contrast is to draw the reader's attention to a basic mistake the Corinthians had made concerning the nature of holiness and morality. The Corinthians had looked upon any salvation they might enjoy as a reward for their virtue. Paul had come to them with the message of the gospel: those who believed in Christ would escape the final judgment. The Corinthians understood the gospel as absolving them from behaving as responsible men. They turned the gospel of grace into licentiousness (Jude 4). In his letter Paul corrects

them, reminding them that although they have been made holy they are yet men of flesh, that as historical beings they are under the wrath of God, a wrath even Jesus experienced. Their salvation is assured but, constrained by the love of Christ,¹¹ they are expected to act not from self-interest but from an awareness of their responsibility toward others. Such an awareness, it seems to me, is equally at home in an environment of absolute standards or of relative ethics. What makes this true is that what has become central for the Christian is not the virtue he or she can amass but the love that he or she can express. Virtue boasts of its achievements. Love delights in what is loved and for the believer what is loved is Jesus and people.

¹¹By the love of Christ could be meant "their love for Christ" or "Christ's love for them" but the phrase probably incorporates both meanings.

CHAPTER 9: Summary and Conclusion

We have been discussing the issue of the emerging pluralism in the church, a pluralism which testifies to the success of Christianity as a global religion and yet a pluralism which seems problematic in light of Christ's promise that the Spirit of truth would lead believers into all truth. We stated that this pluralism seems problematic because of assumptions derived from statements in Scripture about the desired unity of believers and the oneness of God as well as suppositions inherited from the ancient world about the oneness of the universe (unus meaning one and versum meaning to turn, hence that which is turned into one or combined into a single whole) and the appropriateness of linear thought as a tool for generalizing about that oneness. We were further concerned that divisions in the church undermined traditional conceptions about the power of God. After all, if Jesus who intercedes for his church, a church described in Scripture as his body, cannot keep that church united, how can we be sure that Jesus who intercedes for his followers can save them?

We further pointed out that the church places a high value on doctrine, that doctrine is understood as orthodox confession of propositions, and that this concern for doctrine has been a key reason for

divisions in the church. We argued that the position that the faith can be summarized propositionally fosters division because such summaries are secularizations of the faith: they use language (in Genesis 11 divisions based on language are portrayed as a judgment of God) and philosophical tools (what Paul would describe as the wisdom of the world). Hence such confessions are interpretations and as such provisional. To study theology is to study the emergence of pluralism.

Throughout the entire discussion we have assumed that the Judao-Christian revelation is a revelation of truth, that the Old and New Testaments are records of that revelation (neither being complete without the other), and that historical/cultural considerations relativize all our attempts to articulate that truth.

The problem is clearly one of conditionedness both in the revelation and our interpretations of the revelation. Such conditionedness would suggest that our conclusions are always provisional. This means that we can never be certain that our knowledge of the truth or our obedience to the law will be sufficient to save us. Therefore of the three syntheses we discussed in chapter eight, the rational and the ethical are the least accurate models of our salvation. The aesthetic synthesis by contrast if

based on faith and love seems more promising since such a synthesis requires of the believer a radical surrender to God. It requires that we become knights of faith in the sense that Kierkegaard defined it in Fear and Trembling.

Faith is always a risk for it is an admission that we do not fully know. However, faith is also that which transcends the immediate conditionedness of its expressions. Theology is provisional, that with which it wrestles is divine. During the struggle in darkness on the bank of the Jabbok the Spirit of truth which the believer has been given witnesses to the sin of unbelief, the righteousness of Jesus, and the condemnation of Satan (John 16:7-11). The Spirit by pointing to Jesus (John 16:13) will guide us into all truth but Paul seems to be saying that full knowledge of that truth will not come now (I Cor. 13:12).

It is the mind of Christ which we have been given which creates in us three conditions: faith in Christ, hope (that is, a persistent anticipation, a watchful waiting) and love understood as humble and selfless service. Given this perspective, divisions within the church witness not to failures in the church but to vitality. They express the enduring excitement of our conviction that the quest to which we have

been called is a quest for that which really matters. Such divisions need not compromise our confidence in God's power to save for God remains the constant factor in the change. It is after all God who is the offended party. If God has chosen to forgive us, it is appropriate for us who believe to profess we are forgiven.

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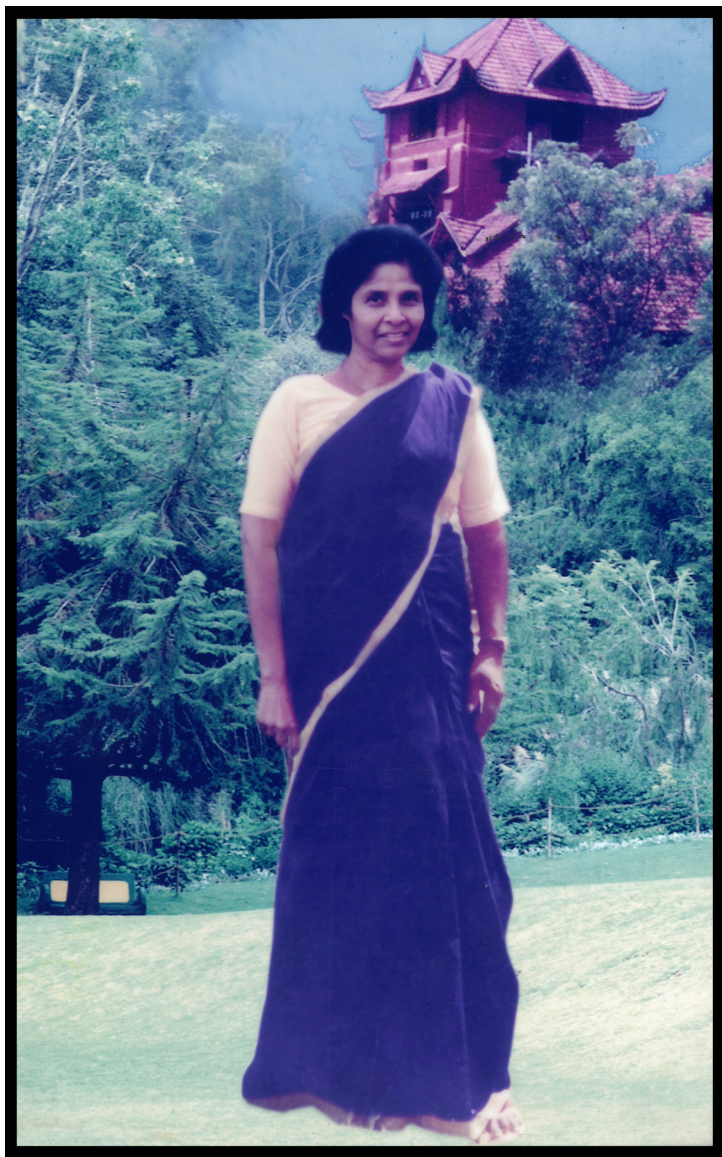
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In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.

The years wrap us unevenly

In their variegated textures.

For time unfolds according to its order.

But we get old a piece at a time.

A string of gray surrounds us.

A persistent stiffness,

A crumb of decay, a sudden splinter of pain.

Old age comes unevenly.

Rapping at us like a woodpecker.

Dr. Ben Michael Carter



Mike's library is available for viewing at 2505 W. Northgate Drive in Irving Texas.



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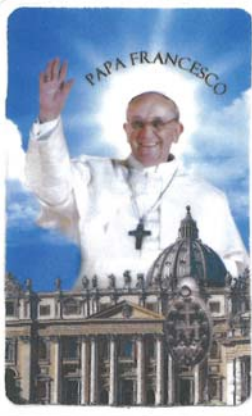
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From the Vatican, 19 September 2017

Dear Ms Carter,

I am writing to acknowledge the gift of inscribed copies of Dr Ben Michael Carter's writings, which you presented to His Holiness Pope Francis.

In expressing appreciation for this kind gesture, I am pleased to assure you of His Holiness's prayers for your late husband and for you and your intentions.



Yours sincerely,

Monsignor Paolo Borgia
Assessor

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Ben Michael “Mike” Carter was a Renaissance man who loved writing. He authored six theology books and a novel. He also wrote for magazines, journals and newspapers, as well as poetry reviews. He earned a B.A. in Economic History from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, an MA in theological studies from Wheaton College, Illinois, an M.Th. from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, U.K., and a Ph.D. in History of Christianity in the non-western world from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, United Kingdom. He was a member of the Irving chapter of the Texas Poetry Society, the American Scientific Affiliation, and the Evangelical Theological Society. He was married to Salma Carunia from Dohnavur Fellowship, Tirunelvel, South India.