

GOD'S GRACE AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE PREACHED SERMON:
BRINGING LUTHERAN PROCLAMATION OF GOD'S GRACE
TOGETHER WITH ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE ETHICAL TEACHING

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology of Emmanuel College
and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology
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Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
Awarded by the University of St. Michael's College

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ABSTRACT

The contextual task at hand is that of moving God's grace to the centre of North American Mennonite theology and preaching, where a strong theology of discipleship has left God's grace and agency at the margins. Moving grace to the centre of the preached sermon requires the scholarly disciplines of New Testament studies, theology, and homiletics. An exploration of Paul's "logic" used to weave God's grace and Christian ethics, together with a spatial reading of Romans 5 and 6, reveals that believers are "in Christ" – a new territory or sphere where God's superabundant grace gives rise to new behaviour. In an attempt to grapple theologically with the dynamics of God's grace and Christian discipleship, the work of two theological ethicists is examined. John Howard Yoder, an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar, assumes the grace of God but does not develop it in a fulsome way in his case for discipleship modeled on the nonviolent way of Jesus. Oswald Bayer, a Lutheran scholar, characterizes discipleship not as following Jesus but as a passive venture where the believer responds to God's grace (God's spoken *promissio*) and is thereby "opened up" and "uncurved" and thus able to recognize and respond in love to God,

creation, and the needs of the neighbour. Paul Scott Wilson, together with other contributors to the law/gospel school of homiletics, brings the best of Mennonite discipleship and Lutheran grace together with his understanding of proclamation – a term that he defines in a particular way. Through the Holy Spirit, the preached sermon is both *about* the gospel (teaching) and an *event* of the gospel (proclamation), but the emphasis is on the latter. It is only in the context of the crucified and risen Christ who speaks a word of promise, that this same Jesus Christ can be appropriated as teacher and model for life. Finally, new possibilities in theology and preaching are explored with a view to integrating law/gospel homiletics and God's spoken *promissio* with Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and preaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Three events stand out as spiritual and intellectual impetus for this study:

Event 1: “We have been given work to do but not the power to do it.” These were the words that I recall of John E. Toews, then president of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, in a sermon preached at Rockway Mennonite Church in the spring of 1995. Being given the work to do but not the power to do it, was Toews way of critiquing a current North American Mennonite view of discipleship. I heard the preacher calling for a new and strong connection between the call of Jesus to radically serve others and the empowering grace of God. John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite scholar whose work I was somewhat familiar with, was mentioned by Toews in this sermon as one who had rightly called the church in the 1970s and beyond to heed the radical call to follow Jesus in everyday life – especially in following Jesus’ way of nonviolence. But Yoder, the preacher suggested, had sadly sidelined the work of the Spirit and the grace of God, making it seem as though it was up to the Christian to solve the world’s ills. I heard Toews calling for a reassessment of current Mennonite theology which would take seriously the unmerited and empowering grace of God together with Jesus’ call to radical discipleship.

The notion that discipleship was strongly connected to the empowering grace of God struck me as both stunning and liberating. Having been an M. Div.-toting minister and preacher in a Mennonite context for more than ten years I was forced to look back on hundreds of my own sermons. In my preaching I was constantly, albeit with well worked out narrative homiletical

strategies, calling for more acts of love, more discipleship, better ethics – how else is the preacher supposed to end a sermon? Following a model given to me in Mennonite institutions, including the works of John Howard Yoder, living a life like Jesus was at the centre of my preaching. I was preaching on human agency and paying little attention to the agency and grace of God – the place where discipleship has its source.

Event 2: Some years later I was engaged in a conversation over coffee with an undergrad university student who had spent most of her teen years listening to my sermons.

Meg: “I really want to thank you for the teaching and preaching, over the years.”

Me: “Wow. You’re welcome. Why are you thanking me?”

Meg: “I liked your stories. The Jesus stories were great! You and others in the church have really shown me that I can follow Jesus ... but I can do this without believing in God. Jesus was a great moral leader. I am trying to follow his path – to be a peacemaker and a worker for justice. I am so not sure what to do with God though!”

Jesus was a leader and moral teacher but he was not divine. She was telling me that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, to put it one way, were not connected in my preaching and in the life of Rockway Mennonite Church. In her understanding, Jesus had been reduced to an ethical teacher, and his teachings were in no way linked to his being the second person of the trinity, or the saving work in the cross and resurrection. The sermon for Meg was a teaching session that helped to reinforce her atheistic yet passionate following of Jesus.

Event 3: In 1999 I found myself in a preaching class at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Waterloo, Ontario. Toward the end of the semester, after each of the students preached the required sermon, the first question asked by the professor was, “Where did you hear the gospel?” I was struck by the question and immediately was taken back to the issue raised by John Toews in his sermon some years earlier. Lutherans (and indeed many Protestants, I later discovered) ask the question of the grace of God because the sermon rises and falls on the event of God’s grace. But Mennonites, in my experience, would ask an entirely different question of the sermon:

Where is the moral, or the reference to how to be a disciple? In my tradition, as I had experienced it, the preached sermon rises and falls on the call to do more, to get it right this time, to follow Jesus more closely.

The first sermon I preached in class was appreciated by my Lutheran classmates, but parts of my sermon were critiqued as law, and not gospel. Law and gospel were new categories for me. I feared that my fellow students were correct not only about my preaching but of Mennonite preaching in general. I then set myself on a path to do some scholarly work on God's grace and the gospel, topics that were not new to me but had always been assumed or put on the back burner in my Mennonite upbringing and theological education.

These three experiences centred on preaching and the theology that informs preaching – two from within the Mennonite fold, and one in a Lutheran context. Together with other similar homiletic experiences I started down a path that would include biblical studies, theology, and homiletics in the interest of moving grace to the centre of the Anabaptist-Mennonite sermon. In the first event, John E. Toews inspired me to work on connecting God's grace to discipleship. The conversation with Meg stunned me into a critical stance with regard to the topic of discipleship, narrative preaching strategies, and the issue of what is made explicit and what is assumed in the sermon: I was assuming a divine Jesus, but apparently the listener was not hearing this. The third conversation thrust me into the sermon as event, as an experience of God's grace. God's grace, as it had been communicated to me in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, while crucial to faith, was to be assumed in such a way that one could simply move on to the central notion of discipleship. Grace was what the Lutherans were focused on; we Anabaptist-Mennonites focused on discipleship. God's grace, in other words, appeared to me now to be marginal in the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological matrix. The other notion that struck me in the third event was that the sermon could be not only *about* something, but could *do* something. The sermon could, for those listening, not only be a vehicle of Christian instruction, but an actual experience of the grace of God.

Thesis Statement

While teaching about discipleship can be an important feature of a given sermon, the centre of all preaching should focus on an encounter with God's grace. When God's grace is moved from the margins to the centre of preaching, the sermon can become not only a moment of teaching about a given aspect of Christian life or faith, but an event of God's unmerited grace. It is in the Christ event through the Spirit that listeners are again gifted by God and empowered to live lives of discipleship. For Christians, the grace of God shown in creation, in the forming of a people, and especially in the embodied life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a gift which is both salvific and empowering. Moving God's agency and grace to the centre of the sermon ensures that human sin, wounds, and even Christian discipleship, are put into perspective. Moving the triune God's grace to the centre of the sermon suggests that the sermon is both about the gospel (teaching) and a happening of the gospel (proclamation) through the Holy Spirit, but the emphasis is on the latter. It is only in the context of the risen Jesus Christ who is present in the preached sermon – making the gospel happen – that this same Jesus Christ can be appropriated as teacher and a model for life. Sermons envisioned by this dissertation have their primary focus on God grace, and on God's saving event of Jesus Christ for the church and for the world.

Thesis Context: Joining a Wave of Mennonite Grace

This dissertation joins a wave of studies over the last decades by North American Anabaptist-Mennonite¹ scholars where the grace of God is brought into conversation with a strong theology of discipleship. C. Arnold Snyder, an Anabaptist historian, speaking at the

1. When I refer to North American Anabaptist-Mennonites in this dissertation I am referring primarily to one denomination of Mennonites, known in Canada as "Mennonite Church Canada" and in the United States as "Mennonite Church USA." Mennonite Church Canada has 35,000 members in 235 churches. Mennonite Church USA has 111,000 members in 950 congregations. This denomination claims the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century as their spiritual forbearers. See Kanagy and Suderman for the most recent theological and social studies of this two- nation denomination. Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2007); Robert J. Suderman, *God's People Now: Face to Face with Mennonite Church Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2007).

graduation ceremony at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Goshen, Indiana, in the spring of 2010, aptly summed up a broad movement characterized by Mennonite focus on grace in the last decades. He noted that *The Anabaptist Vision*, a shaping document for Mennonites written in 1944 by H. S. Bender, needed refocusing. The central tenets of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity as determined by Bender – discipleship, nonresistance, and community – are not the starting point for faith, as had been assumed for decades, but rather the fruits of a living relationship with God in Christ. Theology precedes discipleship. Put another way, God’s grace precedes Christian ethics. Snyder noted that Bender’s *Vision* should not stand alone but should be read together with an article Bender wrote in the years just before his death where he connects discipleship with the regenerating work of God’s grace.²

This refocusing – this Anabaptist-Mennonite retrieval of God’s grace and agency in the 1980s and 1990s in North America was happening in a number of theological disciplines. I will note only a few here. A. James Reimer was working in the area of systematic theology, and was placing Mennonite ethical concerns within larger ecumenical and theological contexts in the interest of placing discipleship on a firm theological foundation.³ Harry Huebner has been active for more than forty years as a teacher and researcher in the areas of theology, philosophy, and ethics. Understanding God’s grace in connection to Christian discipleship has been a top concern.⁴ Marlene Kropf was working on the priority of God’s grace and encounter with God in

2. C. Arnold Snyder, “Bread, Not Stone: Refocusing the Anabaptist Vision,” Commencement Address (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, 22 May 2010); Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1944); Harold S. Bender, “Walking in the Resurrection: The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (1961): 96–110.

3. A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001). This work is a collection of essays spanning 1978-2000. Several of his essays in the last two-thirds of the collection treat the issue of God’s grace as seen in Lutheran and Catholic traditions in connection with Christian discipleship and pacifism. In “Lost Horizon: Whatever Happened to Classical Theology?” (321-336), written in 1983, Reimer calls for an integration of the reality of personal forgiveness of sins (Evangelical), obedience to Jesus’ teachings (Anabaptist), and classical theology (Catholic).

4. Harry J. Huebner, *Echos of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Waterloo, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2005); Harry Huebner and David Schroeder, *Church as Parable: What Ever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 1993).

the area of worship and spirituality in her teaching and denominational leadership since the mid 1980s.⁵

While refocusing on God's grace in recent decades in this tradition has been happening in the disciplines of history, theology, spirituality, and worship, little has been done in this regard in the area of preaching or the discipline of homiletics. Two chapters in *Anabaptist Preaching*, a collection of essays written in 2003, treat the issue of God's grace.⁶ These two chapters will be helpful as this dissertation unfolds. However, the most glaring conclusion of most scholarship on Mennonite preaching – and there is very little scholarship – is the simple observation that the Anabaptist-Mennonite sermon does not place God's grace at the centre. David B. Greiser notes that for the early Anabaptists themes of obedience, separation from sin, and discipleship are prominent in the sermon.⁷ “Admonition” characterizes the style of the early Anabaptists according to the historical work of John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller: “Sin, repentance, and admonition to live a good Christian life were fundamental Anabaptist themes.”⁸ They conclude: “Early Anabaptist sermons often included stories about the results of being good to inspire others to also be like Jesus.”⁹ Jumping to the twentieth century, James H. Waltner's dissertation shows that Christian living, discipleship, and moral renewal are top themes and concerns in American Mennonite preaching in the 1960s.¹⁰

The centrality of ethics, morality, and discipleship continue to dominate the North American Mennonite pulpit. Ervin Stutzman likens grace and ethics in Mennonite theology,

5. Marlene Kropf, “How Do We Know When It's Good Worship?” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 36–44; Everett Thomas, “Q & A with Marlene Kropf,” *The Mennonite* 13 (September 2010): 34–37.

6. David B. Greiser and Michael A. King, eds., *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew, and Bible* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2003). The two chapters which will contribute positively to this dissertation are “God's Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm (76-93), and Ervin Stutzman's “Preaching Grace to Hard Working People” (200-213).

7. Greiser and Michael A. King, *Anabaptist Preaching*, 21.

8. John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller, “Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists,” *Gospel Herald* 90, no. 34 (2 September 1997): 4.

9. Oyer and Keith Graber Miller, “Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists,” 8.

10. James H. Waltner, “The Authentication of Preaching in the Anabaptist Tradition” (School of Theology at Claremont, 1971), 81, 113, 116, 122.

preaching, and life to a race. God's grace puts the Christian in the race but then the Christian takes over with his own energy so that running and winning the race is really up to the runner. Grace is assumed as a past event and little grace if any is needed for the race: the Christian now takes over by listening to and heeding a good sermon where a call to do more and run faster is a primary goal.¹¹ If, as Stutzman claims, preaching has been one of the vehicles which has fostered Mennonites life in North American in the last centuries,¹² then the need for development of the place of God's grace in Anabaptist-Mennonite preaching is even more needed. Thus this paper is rooted in Bible and theology, before we turn to preaching. As we believe, so we preach: as we preach, so we believe.

Thesis Structure

To demonstrate this thesis on moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon, this project will proceed as follows. Chapter one turns to the Bible, specifically to the way Paul views the "logic" of the relationship between God's grace and Christian ethics. Moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon requires a look at how grace functions within the biblical text. Here we look to Paul and to Romans 5 and 6. Here we ask, what has God's grace to do with Christian obedience, and Christian obedience to do with God's grace? As a way to start viewing God's grace in relationship to Christian discipleship we ask, how does scripture address this issue? Here we look to Paul and late twentieth century Pauline scholars and seek a range of possible options for the relationship between God's grace and Christian action. Here indicative/imperative, and various narrative approaches are examined as a way to see how Paul links God's grace with morality in Christian life. This chapter continues with an exposition of Romans 5 and 6. Here I offer glimpses into the kind of logic that Paul is using as he says to the Roman Christians that they "are justified by faith" and "standing in grace" (5:1-11) and at the same time are "slaves"

11. Ervin R. Stutzman, "Preaching Grace to Hardworking People," in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew, and Bible*, ed. David B. Greiser and Michael A. King (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2003), 207.

12. Stutzman, "Preaching Grace," 203.

who must “obey” their new master (6:15-17). How is Paul connecting God’s unmerited grace with Christian obedience and servitude? I explore here, among other rhetorical devices in the text, the ways in which Paul uses “spatial” logic in order to deal with the question, “Are we to continue to sin so that grace may abound?” (6:1) The answer is a firm “no!” because those standing in grace are “in Christ” – in a new place where they are paradoxically free to be obedient to a cruciform life. Seen in this way, moving God’s grace to the centre of the sermon does not marginalize discipleship. Rather, discipleship is also central, but only makes sense in the context of God’s amazing grace.

The second chapter of this dissertation outlines the work of Mennonite theological-ethicist John Howard Yoder. Moving grace to the centre of the Anabaptist-Mennonite sermon means mining Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians for the location of grace in their theologies. Here I take up the comment that John E. Toews noted in his sermon so many years ago. Yoder was named by Toews as giving us much to do but was not explicit about the power (God’s grace; the Spirit) to do it. Known mostly for his focus on theological ethics in connection to Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, Yoder is here mined for a theology of grace that might undergird his view of discipleship. Yoder made central the issue that Jesus’ life serves as a model of Christian discipleship – he especially made a convincing case for Christian pacifism and for Mennonites to be in the business of teaching this Jesus-centred pacifism. But does Yoder connect discipleship with God’s grace? Here I look for grace in Yoder’s development of the theological topics of justification, ecclesiology, and eschatology. In this chapter we will find God’s grace and agency *connected* to Christian discipleship but *not fully developed*. Grace is by and large *assumed* by Yoder and it would be easy for the reader to conclude that grace is marginal. If grace is not central in a given theology – even though it may be assumed – how can it be central in preaching?

The third chapter analyzes the theology of Lutheran theological-ethicist Oswald Bayer. Moving grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon will be challenged and strengthened by a

strong theology of grace from one who thinks and believes within a strong tradition of grace. Bayer brings a conservative Lutheran approach to theology where God's grace is uncompromisingly central. Bayer, a life-time scholar of the reformer Martin Luther, stresses that what is central to theology is God's spoken promises. For Bayer, the point of departure for all theology is God's effective promise (*promissio*) addressed to humanity. When that address happens in the church it is called proclamation. God has lavishly given of God's self in speaking the effective promises of creation and its orders, peoplehood, and especially in the verification of that promise – Jesus Christ. God is one who speaks and who awaits a response in faith from humanity. It is this response in faith and in freedom to God and also to the neighbour that we find the place of ethics for Bayer. The primary image which Bayer uses for justification is that of the incurved, selfish, and blind human becoming uncurved and standing tall. When God speaks God's promise, and this promise is received in faith, the human is now standing tall with arms outstretched and able to see the world – to receive its beauty as well as to see where the neighbour needs help. In this chapter I explore this image of God's promise which uncurves the human under the theological topics of justification/sanctification, ecclesiology, eschatology. While this representative Lutheran approach from Bayer cannot be squared with the representative Anabaptist-Mennonite approach from Yoder, there is much fruit in noting differences and similarities. At the end of this chapter I bring together Bayer and Yoder and speculate on how the exercise of reading Bayer and Yoder together might help the preacher move God's grace to the centre of the sermon.

The fourth chapter turns to homiletics. In the first section, I note how the early years of the New Homiletic virtually side-lined issues of ethics or Christian behaviour in stressing metaphor and parable. In the second section I explore how one school within the New Homiletic – the law/gospel school – has sought to place Christian ethics and action in the context of God's grace. Here God's grace is placed in the centre of the sermon in a specific theological way. At the same time, actions of the Christian are directly included and integrated as empowered by that

very grace. Here I explore a specific definition of proclamation with the goal of discerning between what the sermon is *about* and what it is *doing*; between teaching and proclamation in the sermon.

In the fifth and final chapter I begin with a constructive look at what it might mean to move grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon under four topics of theology: Jesus Christ, justification/sanctification, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Here I engage the work of my mentors in the field of homiletics as well as Oswald Bayer and John Howard Yoder. Secondly, I offer a resource for teaching preaching with a view to keeping God's grace central in the sermon. Here I propose a second-level seminary course in theology and homiletics where Oswald Bayer, John Howard Yoder, and Paul Scott Wilson, as well as some of their interlocutors, together with select sermons, are studied with the view of making God's grace central in the preached sermon. In this last chapter I also offer concluding comments for the dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

GRACE AND ETHICS IN PAUL'S LOGIC

Introduction

In the interest of moving God's grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon, this chapter will analyze several approaches to linking God's grace to Christian behaviour in Pauline literature. The section of this chapter looks to scholarly approaches which place Paul's writings on God's grace in connection with his statements about Christian behaviour or discipleship. We look here to Paul's logic: what metaphors, rhetorical devices, and arguments does Paul use as he writes to the churches about their behaviour in relation to their new found experience of God's grace?¹³ Here we examine an indicative/imperative approach, followed by the more recent approaches of N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, and Michael Gorman. By responding to some of the inadequacies of the indicative/imperative approach, Wright, Hays, and Gorman provide helpful insights into reading Paul's complex way of describing how the new life in Christ shapes the life of the believer. Many features of the so called "New Perspective on Paul," or "New Paul," or "New Perspective," are highlighted and critiqued here.¹⁴

13. Brian S. Rosner, "That Pattern of Teaching?: Ethics and Essays in Pauline Ethics," in *Understanding Paul's Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 1–22. Rosner notes several approaches which have been used to study Pauline ethics. Some schools of study focus on the roots of Paul's ethics (5), while some look to historical studies which compare, say, Graeco-Roman virtues to the virtues which Paul mentions (12). Others look to the "shape" of his ethics – some looking at individual units such as the household codes (15-17). Still others may focus on the "foundations" of Paul's ethics. Can one "boil it all down to love" or some other principal? The "logic" of Paul's ethics – which is what I am working at here – according to Rosner, has to do with studying the indicative/imperative relationship or the relationship in general between Paul's theology and ethics (17-20).

14. An excellent summary and critique of the new perspective can be found in Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). See 101-258 where he summarizes the work of more than thirty

The second section of this chapter looks to Romans 5 and 6. These two chapters are key places for Pauline scholarship on the issue of grace and ethics. What kind of logic is Paul using when he says to the Roman Christians that they “are justified by faith” and “standing in grace” (5:1-11), and at the same time are “slaves” who must “obey” their new master (6:15-17)? Here we explore the metaphors Paul is using as he stresses God’s unmerited “free gift .. through ... Jesus Christ” (5:17) and also implores them to “present” their “members to God as instruments of righteousness” (6:13). What does God’s grace have to do with Christian behaviour? We will look at how Paul is rhetorically and theologically connecting God’s unmerited saving work to the life of the Christian obedience. In these few paragraphs he touches on a wide range of theological issues such as grace, righteousness, Adam/Christ, baptism, reconciliation, and sin – all for the purposes of focussing on what the superabundant grace of God has to do with Christian life. I will look especially here to the way in which Paul uses “spatial logic” to deal with the issue of God’s over-the-top grace and Christian obedience. That the believer is “in Christ,” “in” the new reign, or transferred to a new sphere means that the believer is paradoxically free to be obedient to live according the patterns of a cruciform life.

Part I: Three Approaches to Paul’s Logic of Grace and Ethics

twentieth-century new perspective scholars. An up-to-date summary from the one who coined the term ‘new perspective’ and who continues to be at the very centre of this stream can be found in James G. Dunn’s *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005). The first essay in this work summarizes the new perspective and shows how it has been critiqued from various angles, how it is not monolithic, and how it has changed over the years.

On a personal note, the so called new perspective is not so new for me as one born in 1964 who was raised as a Christian believer in the Mennonite tradition. That Paul’s notion of justification and salvation has communal, personal, and political implications, that the story of Jesus is being told by Paul, that Jesus’ death and resurrection as well as his life are relevant to Christian ethics, and that faith is related to “faithfulness” are not new readings of Paul but have been a part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in various forms since its inception. See John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2004).

The Indicative/Imperative Approach

One of the twentieth century approaches used to understand the logic of Paul's ethics in light of divine grace is the indicative/imperative approach. Here Paul's letters, chapters, and verses are divided into two categories. Indicative statements are those phrases, verses or chapters in Paul's letters which refer to God's saving work in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as God's continuing work in the Holy Spirit. The emphasis in the indicative is on God's divine agency and unmerited grace. Imperatives are those statements which describe appropriate behaviors (Rom 14:13-23), in some way illustrate the believer's role in living out the Christian life (i.e. the obedient slave in Rom 6), or strongly implore believers to cease one activity and/or perform another (Gal 5:16-26). The case can be made that the imperatives are "based on," or find their "foundation" in the prior indicatives of God.¹⁵ The Christian life, behaviour or ethics is thus rooted in the grace of God, or in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here ethics follows or is grounded in theology. Romans 3:28 ("saved by grace through faith") and other similar indicative statements in Romans (1:16-17; 5:1-2) provide the foundation for the imperatives in the latter parts of Paul's letter. The "since" or "therefore" at the beginning of chapter twelve signals a section where the imperatives are employed *on the basis* of the indicatives or the theology which has preceded (1-8).

On the face of it, there is much to be gained from dividing Paul's letters, chapters and verses by way of searching for the indicatives and imperatives and then exploring the relationship between these two moods or categories of address. One of the benefits of this approach is that a distinction is maintained between God's work in the event of salvation through Christ and the human response of faith. Sorting out indicatives and imperatives has a way of clarifying God's divine grace as prior to anything that believers do. It puts the believer in his place.

15. Rosner, "That Pattern of Teaching," 17-20.

However, as one tries to identify and discriminate between indicatives and imperatives in Paul's letters one finds that there are places where the distinction is unclear. The indicative and the imperative can show up in one verse, suggesting an intimate connection. Galatians 5:25 (“Since we live by the Spirit (indicative), let us keep in step with the Spirit (imperative)”) and I Corinthians 5:7 (“Cleanse out the old leaven (imperative), as you are already unleavened (indicative)”) show close and direct relationship between the indicative and the imperative. The Christian is not divided here between belief and action but lives a life worthy of the calling to which they were called, to echo Philippians 4:1.

Just as one cannot sharply divide verses in Paul's letters between indicative and imperative, or between theology and ethics, one can not easily divide Paul's individual letters. It would be too simple to say that Romans chapters 1-11 deals with theology in the “indicative mode” and that chapters 12-16 deals with ethics in the “imperative mode.” The “since” or “therefore” of Romans 12:1 marks a new division but that division may have little to do with “theology and ethics” as we know it. Romans chapters 1-11, which contain treasured theological statements in the indicative mode is not without ethical instruction – even if indirect at times. Paul notes in chapter 1 that some have been “given over to dishonorable passions” (1:26) and “improper conduct” (1:28). These ones are “filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice ... envy, murder, strife, deceit” In chapter 2 Paul lists the sins of God's chosen people. Here boasting and not doing what one preaches with regard to stealing and adultery, are singled out. While Paul's logic here is to argue that all have sinned and fallen short (3:23), and that God has remedied this in the “righteousness of God made manifest apart from the law” (3:21), Paul has made reference to what the Christian life is *not* supposed to look like. He will make this more explicit later in Romans, but certainly the reader can glean in chapters 1 and 2 that the Christian community is not one of dishonorable passions, envy, murder, deceit, gossip, boasting or stealing.

A helpful discussion of the relationship between indicative and imperative can be found in Michael Parsons' article entitled "Being Precedes Act."¹⁶ Parsons argues that the indicative and imperative should not be viewed as virtually unrelated, nor should they be fused and thus indistinguishable. In other words, Parsons is arguing that the indicative and the imperative should not be too far apart, nor too close, but "just right." They should be in a close relationship but distinguishable.¹⁷ Parsons points out that while C. H. Dodd states that the indicative and imperative are organically related, Dodd functionally creates too much of a divide between them.¹⁸ Dodd's division of religion (faith, worship, salvation, hope) and ethics (conduct, moral judgment) – along with his division of *kerygma* and *didache* – drives a wedge between the indicative and the imperative to the extent that Paul's *didache* is hardly rooted in the *kerygma* but rather rooted in the stock moral teachings of Graeco-Roman society.¹⁹ Dodd puts the indicative and the imperative at arms length in an unhelpful way. Indeed Dodd can hardly say that *didache* is "based on" or "arises from" the *kerygma*, when the source is really contemporary Graeco-Roman moral teachings. Dodd's message seems to be that the *kerygma* comes from God, and the *didache* comes from human sources – even if they may coincide with the *kerygma*. For Dodd, there is thus hardly anything new or radical about Christian ethics.

Not pleased with a sharp distinction between the indicative and the imperative, Parsons turns to Paul Furnish and Paul Ramsey who have seemed to fuse these two moods so that it is impossible to see the distinguishing line between God's grace and human action. For instance, Furnish argues that the imperative is included in the indicative: Paul's "evangelizing activity," as seen in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 and 4:2, "already included exhortation,

16. Michael Parsons, "Being Precedes Act: Indicative and Imperative in Paul's Writing (1998)," in *Understanding Paul's Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 217–47.

17. Parsons, "Being Precedes Act," 218.

18. Parsons is citing C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (Cambridge, 1963). See Parsons, n.5, 219.

19. Parsons, "Being Precedes Act," 230.

encouragement and instruction” and thus must be seen as closely related.²⁰ Furnish further argues that the object of Romans (Rom 1:16-17; “the gospel of righteousness from God”) does not change but is simply described in different ways throughout the letter. Furnish turns out to be the polar opposite of Dodd. Dodd could hardly say that Paul's *didache* arises from the *kerygma*. For Furnish, if God's grace (read *kerygma*) already includes obedience then ethics does not “arise from it” but is “*fully integral to it.*”²¹ Christian action is then, automatic, or built in. If so, why does Paul have to constantly remind the Romans and the Corinthians of their sinful behaviour?

Parsons argues that Paul Ramsey, in *Basic Christian Ethics*, fuses the indicative and the imperative as well. Paul's ethics are reduced to “love” which is a human response of gratitude to God's love. Parsons notes that for both Ramsey and Furnish, the particular ethical demands of Paul are not taken seriously because in the fusion of the indicative and the imperative, the imperatives are all but lost. What happens then is that Paul's particular imperatives lose their identity in the indicatives leaving no clear place for Paul's very specific words to the churches.²² “Love” becomes an imperative but with little bite, for all is subsumed under love without particularity.

Foregoing both a divorce and a fusion of the indicative and the imperative, Parsons longs for a connection between the indicative and the imperative that makes each distinct but closely connected. He sees Paul placing the indicative and the imperative in an “interconnected” way so that they are in “juxtaposition” or are “adjacent” to one another.²³ Or, one could place the indicative and imperative not in a fusion but in an “equilibrium.” Paul Bornkamm puts the connection in an equilibrium, and yet something has to come first in

20. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 224. Parsons is quoting from Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1968), 113.

21. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, 226. Original emphasis. Cited in Parsons 225.

22. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 227–28.

23. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 229–30.

sequence: “to live on the basis of *grace*, but to *live* on the basis of grace.”²⁴ It is clear for Bornkamm, as it is for Parsons that one precedes the other. As the title of Parsons’ article suggests, being precedes act. In other words, the imperative is always based on the “fact of a new nature” which is given entirely by the grace of God.²⁵ Ethical behaviour is an “appropriation of what has already been assigned in the work of the Lord and of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶ Parsons cites Romans 6 and notes the way in which Paul exhorts the believers only in the context of the reality that the Christian is “in Christ” and “dead to sin.” That the Christian is dead to sin and alive through Christ has implications, and Paul is spelling them out in his imperatives.²⁷

For Parsons, the work of the Spirit is crucial for Paul as he brings together God’s work of salvation and the behaviour of the believer. On the topic of the indicative, the imperative, the Spirit, and transformation, Parsons quotes T. J. Deidun:

Here the indicative and the imperative are cojoined: the Christian’s new will, constantly flowing from the activity of the Spirit, is the divinely wrought indicative which *carries within itself* the Christian imperative. There can be nothing more ‘indicative’, and, at the same time, nothing more ‘imperative’, than the activity of the Spirit creating and sustaining my own personal instinct.²⁸

Here the location of the indicative and the imperative is important to note. The connection between, or the dissonance of, the indicative and the imperative dwells not in the person as much as in the Spirit. The connection remains a mystery and a subject of the Spirit’s indwelling in the person – thus a subject not only of speculation but of prayer as well.

Parsons poses a good starting point here. There is a ‘right’ distance and distinction which needs to be upheld here so that neither the indicative (God’s work through Christ) nor the imperative (what Christian life looks like) gets lost. Yet, it is important in this

24. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 230.

25. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 230.

26. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 229.

27. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 230.

28. Parsons, “Being Precedes Act,” 232. From T.J. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome, 1981), 243. His emphasis.

juxtaposition or equilibrium that “being proceeds act” – that the new nature provided by God through Christ and the Spirit is the only context for this new behaviour. The Christian has not simply been declared right with God in an act of justification but also has been given a new nature (2 Cor 5:12) and has been moved to a new realm where obedience from the heart is possible (Rom 6:17). This will be explored further below in Part II.

Parsons offers an excellent starting place for this chapter and this entire study, in part, because the curious reader of the biblical text is provided many words and concepts to practice as she attempts to sort out the connection between the indicative and the imperative, between God’s grace and human action. Is *divorce* the best word? Shall we say they are *fused*? What is the right *distance*, or should we even use *distance* as a model? What do we mean when we say they are *close* but to be *distinguished* from each other? Shall we say they are *juxtaposed*? Are they in *equilibrium*? We discover in this short article that there are words or concepts for this deep quandary of the relationship between God’s grace and Christian behaviour. However, we also find that even the right words or concepts are not entirely capable of solving this mystery.

Significant is Parsons’ conclusion that the Spirit’s work is crucial in the transformation of the believer, and that the Spirit is a mediating presence that exists between, or is perhaps the dwelling place or vehicle for the riddle of the indicative and imperative. I wonder, however, if the cross of Christ or the life of Christ may play a role here? As we shall see below, participation “in Christ” serves as a way in which Paul unites the grace of God and Christian behaviour. In Romans 5 and 6, sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, or being “knitted in Christ” in his death serves to communicate something of the location in which the believer is transformed and conformed. Secondly, by way of critique, there is little in Parsons’ article about the society, assumptions or history in which Paul wrote. His study of indicatives and imperatives has us looking at the trees when there is much forest to discover in Paul’s world. What are some of the larger issues of the faith and the “narratives” which

underlie Paul's discussion of God's grace and Christian behaviour? What are the larger issues that are at work here? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Narrative Approaches

A second way to approach the logic of God's grace and human action in Pauline literature is a narrative approach. Narrative readings of various types have been a hallmark of Pauline study in the last forty years.²⁹ The narrative question we focus our attention on as we look to the work of N.T. Wright and Richard B. Hays is: what are the larger narratives or stories that Paul brings with him, evokes, or assumes in his letters that may help us view God's grace and Christian response? Narratives here can refer to frameworks, paradigms, or assumed world-views which may or may not be obvious to the readers of any given era or culture which is handed a Pauline letter.³⁰ This way of reading the text takes a step back from particular verses and chapters – from the moods of indicative and imperative verbs for instance – in order to ask broader questions which in the end will help the reader place smaller units into a larger context.

In his introduction to his chapter on Paul in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Hays argues that looking at the indicative and imperative in Paul must be seen in the context of larger issues such as Paul's own story, his vocation, and the story of Jesus that he is proclaiming. Hays notes that dividing ethics and theology, or *kerygma* and *didache*, in simplistic ways does not get to the depths or complexity of Paul's texts. Paul, for instance, is not a theologian but a pastor on the move:

They [ethics and theology, indicative and imperative, and *kerygma* and *didache*] are packed together, under pressure: specific pastoral problems in Paul's churches elicit his theological reflection. Thus, we see theology in progress, unfolding. Paul is not simply repeating already formulated doctrines; rather, he is theologizing as he writes, and the constant aim of his theological reflection is to shape the behaviour of his

29. See Bruce W. Longenecker, "Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul: Retrospective and Prospective," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3–16.

30. Longenecker, "Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul," 8–9.

churches. Theology is for Paul never merely a speculative exercise; it is always a tool for constructing community.³¹

Thus Paul's so-called theologizing is already inherently social, or, as Hays notes, is aimed at community-building and in this sense has to do with how these Christians will act with one another and with the world.

Seeing Paul as a pastor in this way makes it hard to divide Paul's theology and ethics into two distinct categories. However, the indicative and imperative – while packed under pressure – are not fused for Hays. Hays affirms that Paul's ethics are “rooted in” his theology. Moreover, following J.C. Beker, Hays will note that behind Paul's “various responses to the *contingencies* of the community's struggle to live faithfully stands ... a singular *coherent* gospel.”³² This narrative view of Paul's theology and ethics does not obliterate the study of indicatives and imperatives, but rather puts the riddle in context. The narrative move here, as we shall see, has a way of showing a more complex but hopefully more complete picture of the relationship between the gospel and ethics, indicatives and imperatives, of God's agency and Christian agency.

Before launching into snap shots of the narrative work of N.T. Wright and Richard Hays, I am going to distinguish here between two kinds of narrative readings of Paul – even though these two readings are artificial in many respects and most certainly overlapping. Wright's narrative approach looks at the world in which Paul is living and then notes how Paul is rethinking and refashioning the Christ event within the context of that world. Here the emphasis is not firstly on the Pauline text itself as a starting point but rather on the narratives which include historical context, and the “world-view” in which Paul is writing. I will look below here to N. T. Wright's contention that Paul lives in and speaks out of three primary stories: creation and covenant, Messiah and apocalyptic, and empire and gospel. By

31. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 18.

32. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 18.

emphasizing these “worlds” in which Paul lives, we are not saying that Wright is disregarding the Pauline text. Far from it. He is attempting to provide a context for showing how Paul refashions these Hebraic and Roman worlds around the event of Christ.³³ The emphasis here is on broadening the view of the reader who can then go to Paul’s text and see his arguments within these various connected narratives.

Richard Hays’ method of looking at Paul’s letters in his *Moral Vision* varies from Wright’s, yet still is concerned with a narrative reading of Paul. While Wright starts with larger narratives and then moves to the Pauline text, Hays –at least here – starts with the Pauline text and notes three overall interlocking theological motifs: namely, eschatology, the cross, and the new life in Christ.³⁴ Again, as with Wright, the method has to do with understanding the larger picture of Paul’s world, narratives, and assumptions before making hasty decisions about individual verses or chapters. We will note as we proceed that while Wright and Hays approach Paul in slightly different ways, a picture of Pauline theology and ethics emerges which has similar features. Wright and Hays have been chosen here for this section of this essay for the complementary picture they provide. As we shall see, Wright and Hays largely share the view that Paul’s indicatives and imperatives as well as his theology and ethics need to be seen in the context of, 1) the significance of Christ’s faithful obedience (as God’s righteousness) symbolized by the cross; 2) the new community shaped around Christ and transformed by the Holy Spirit; and 3) the reconciling vocation of the church in the

33. The forerunner of this kind of study in the current era is of course E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). Of some 600 pages, Paul gets only the last 170. Sanders argues for 430 pages that the Law - always understood in the context of God’s covenant with Israel - was never about “getting in” but “staying in.” Judaism is based on God’s election and not on deeds done or on perfect performance of the Law. Whatever his argument, Sanders’ way of arguing is followed here by Wright: the background (Hebraic here) must be understood before approaching Paul. Wright admits that he shares with Sanders the assumption that “covenant is the hidden predisposition of Jewish literature even when the word hardly occurs.” See Wright, 26.

34. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 19. Longenecker notes that “it was Hays who put the issue of narrative contours explicitly on the agenda of Pauline study.” “Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul,” 6. The book which got many Pauline scholars interested in narrative study of Paul was Hays’ *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 - 4:11* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

context of God's eschatological drama. These two scholars place the Christian life firmly in the context of God's prior acts of creation, covenant, community, and Christ. I will argue throughout that these narrative scholars do not fuse the indicative and the imperative, but keep them in a close and tensive relationship – the priority always on God's initiative. The life and actions of the Christian are always grounded or rooted in God's act in Christ.

N. T. Wright

In Paul's world-view creation and covenant are linked to each other in that God's covenant with Israel is a kind of "repair job" (my words) of God's creation which went awry because of human sin. In Adam, "image-bearing creatures" are no longer "image-bearing" but corrupted by sin.³⁵ Genesis is taken here as the story of how God called Abraham to "undo the sin of Adam" in the formation of a covenant between God and God's people.³⁶ The covenant God makes is with Israel, but is for the sake of the world: "Through Israel God will solve the problems of the world, bringing justice and salvation to the ends of the earth ... (Is 51:12-16, 24)."³⁷ The Torah is seen here as the covenant charter or as the way to undo the "anti-creation" (chaos) of Adam and thus continue the work of creation (4 Ezra). Throughout the Hebrew Bible God continually calls the people to a kind of faithfulness which evokes the image-bearer of the pre-fall world. For Wright the term 'God's righteousness' (*tsedaqah elohim*) is a kind of short-hand for God's faithful and just covenant love which is a remedy for the sin of creation which has sunk into chaos.³⁸

35. N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 35.

36. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 24.

37. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 22.

38. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 25. Wright admits that *tsedaqah elohim* and its Greek equivalent *dikaiosyne theou* are hard to put in English. 'Righteousness' means 'faithfulness' but with a sense of 'justice' included. But this 'justice' is not to be taken in the modern sense as an "abstract ideal ... but from the creator's obligation to the creation and from the covenant God's obligation to be faithful to his promises." (26) Throughout his works, Wright uses what I assume to be a British term when he notes that God's righteousness refers to God's acts which have, are doing, and will "put the world to rights." (26)

God's intent for creation and covenant have been realized in Christ. Paul reveals 'creation and covenant' assumptions explicitly in Colossians 1:15-20, 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 and Romans 1-11.³⁹ For instance, in Romans, whenever Paul evokes *dikaiosyne theou* the reader is ushered to this grand story of God's faithful covenant love as remedy for the sin and chaos of Adam. God has revealed God's *dikaiosyne* (faithful covenant love) in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21 f) who was faithfully obedient unto death.⁴⁰ Jesus fulfills covenant expectations in that he "offered to God the perfect obedience Israel should have offered, and thereby fulfilled on behalf of Israel as well as the world, the rescue operation the covenant has always envisioned."⁴¹ In short, Jesus was the true "image-bearing human" – evidenced by his obedient death on the cross. In Jesus' resurrection God ushered in a new covenant which is at the same time a new creation (2 Cor 5). In this new creation believers can again be image-bearing with regard to true worship, faith, and obedience.

Just as Paul has reworked creation and covenant around the Christ event, so he also refashions Messianic expectation around the death and resurrection of Christ.⁴² Paul's message is that the Messiah – long expected to bring God's righteousness – has now been revealed in Jesus Christ who was faithful to God. This faithfulness was something that God's people, with the Torah and within the Abrahamic covenant, could not do (Rom 3:2-3). In the death and resurrection of the Messiah – and with believers joining him in that death and resurrection (Rom 6) – a new covenant people have come into existence, characterized by the Spirit (Rom 8).⁴³

What does this new era – brought about by the obedience of Christ at the cross – have to do with Christian behaviour? In this new covenant which is characterized by the

39. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 26–28 See also Covenant and Law etc. Give the page numbers.

40. This assumes a reading of faith of Jesus Christ not faith *in* Jesus Christ. He is following Hays here. We will discuss this below.

41. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 38.

42. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 40.

43. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 46.

empowering Spirit, it is now possible for the image bearing creatures to be faithful to God.

Wright draws on 1 Thess 2 & 4 and notes:

God's ultimate future had come forwards into the middle of history, so that the church is living within ... God's new world and the present one. The age to come has already arrived with Jesus; but it will be consummated in the future. The church must order its life and witness, its holiness and love, along that axis.⁴⁴

In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ now frees people to live in a new way. Paul's imperatives are thus not new laws or obligations but simply clarifications of what life looks like in the new age. Further, in the context of the fulfillment of the covenant in Christ, and the new era which has dawned, the work of the Christian is characterized in terms of vocation and mission rather than obligation:

That initial putting-to-rights by the power of the gospel is simultaneously, and necessarily a vocation to each person thus 'justified' to enlist in the ongoing work, by the Spirit, of making God's saving, restorative justice as much of a reality as possible in the present age, in advance of the final putting-to-rights of the whole creation.⁴⁵

Finally, Wright views Paul as a first-century Jew and Roman citizen who is well aware of the power dynamics and power struggle between the Roman Empire and Christ, the Lord of the new era. Themes key to Paul's gospel, like 'freedom,' 'justice,' 'peace,' 'Lord,' 'salvation,' 'Saviour,' even 'gospel,' "were all imperial themes that one could expect to meet in the mass media of the ancient world, that is, on coins, in poetry, in songs and speeches."⁴⁶ Thus Paul's use of these words and concepts for *his* gospel always evoked the *other* grand narrative that was assumed in daily living. In other words, "for Paul, Jesus is Lord and behaviour is not."⁴⁷ The world's true Lord – as seen in his death and resurrection – shows the "unstoppable power of the creator God."⁴⁸ Drawing on Philippians 2:5-11 Wright notes how the cross – a powerful symbol of imperial violence and military might – is now refashioned as

44. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 57.

45. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 147.

46. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 63.

47. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 69.

48. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 70.

“the symbol which had spoken of Behaviour’s mighty power now spoke of God’s naked love.”⁴⁹ In short, “Behaviour did his worst and God did his uttermost.”⁵⁰

Wright sees the letter to the Christians in the Roman capital as loaded with Paul’s counter-imperial theology:

Jesus is the world’s true Lord, constituted as such by his resurrection. He claims the whole world, summoning them to ‘the obedience of faith’, that obedient loyalty which out matches the loyalty Behaviour demanded. The summons consists of the ‘gospel’, a word which, as is now more widely recognized contains the inescapable overtones both of the message announced by Isaiah’s herald, and the good news heralded around the Roman world every time the anniversary of the emperor’s accession, or his birthday, came round again. Paul comes to Rome, not ashamed of this ‘gospel’, as he says in 1:16, because – and here, clearly, every phrase counts – the gospel is God’s power (that word again) of *salvation* (that word again) to all who *believe*, in other words, all those who are faithful and loyal; because in it, God’s *dikaiosyne*, God’s *iustitia*, God’s saving covenant-based justice, is unveiled for all, the Jew first and also the Greek.⁵¹

Wright’s analysis here is similar to other current approaches to the “political Paul.” What Wright correctly states though is that we can not reduce Paul to *merely* a political figure as some do. Paul’s political views of the empire and the church are shaped by God’s saving righteousness – now revealed in Christ – and not the other way around.⁵² At the same time, Wright does not agree with those who sharply divide the religious and the political. Paul does not know that division – a division invented by the Enlightenment and modern democratic right–left thinking.⁵³ The living out of God’s good news is always done in the context of the church community as well as the world community and is therefore “political” in the sense of having to do with structured relations with others, whether that be on the scale of family, church, nation, or the entire earth. Indeed God’s work of reconciliation in Christ reaches into all human relationships and cosmic forces.

49. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 73.

50. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 78.

51. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 77.

52. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 49, 79. For other reading on the ‘political Paul or ‘Paul and empire’ see Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul & Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997).

53. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 59–60.

One of the issues which is central to Wright's work is that the Spirit of God transforms the lives of those who believe and give their whole selves in worship to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The individual is not simply "declared right" by God but "set right" by God to carry on the battle which Christ has already won. The work of the Spirit, made possible in Christ, provides a mission for God's people and the empowerment to do so:

The Spirit is then the one who conforms the Messiah's people to his suffering and glory, so that the Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah is fulfilled not just in the Messiah himself, but, extraordinarily, in his people as well. ... We may even be right to suggest that, through the Spirit, the Christian engages in the present with the ongoing battle which derives from the victory of the cross.⁵⁴

This "ongoing battle" is one characterized by worship of the creator, as opposed to idolatry of the creature (Rom 1:24), holiness, which shows that the living God is active in the world (Rom 12:2), and signs of faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13) in God's new era in the midst of the sinful morality of the decaying era (Rom 1:18-32).⁵⁵

For Wright, Christian action, spirituality, worship, and prayer are not only closely related, but are also signs that witness to the world that God is ever fulfilling the promises of covenant. Rooted in and saved by God's righteousness through Christ and with the Spirit, believers are given the long view that what matters is worshipping and witnessing to the faithful God who will make all things new. The Christian life is one lived in the Spirit and thus a life of having been given over to faith in God's covenant faithfulness. The Christian life is one of faith, or "faithfulness" which includes trust as devotion to God but also obedience (Rom 6:16), in mind and body (Rom 6:12-14; 12:1-2).

While the indicative (God's covenant faithfulness as seen in the advent of Christ) and imperative (the witness of the believers in the new era) are closely related in Wright's work, it is clear as well that the indicative is chronologically and experientially prior to the imperative.

54. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 149.

55. N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul Real the Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 135–38. Here Wright places worship at the centre of this spirituality and ethics.

God's covenant faithfulness has been demonstrated in Christ and is the call that is responded to by humans in faith. It is only in the context of being "in Christ," and thus being in that era which God is bringing about, and the community gathered in Christ, that Christian morality has any meaning at all.

Richard B. Hays

While Hays frames the issues somewhat differently than does Wright, we get a complementary picture of Paul's world and theology with Hays' three theological motifs: eschatology, cross, and community. One difference which is notable here is that Hays is clearer in his linking of "the faith of Jesus Christ," the cross, and Christian ethics. We will note here that Hays assumes the covenant faithfulness of God (with a connection to creation) as one of Paul's primary narratives. While Hays does not mention the political call of the church, his language for the church is strong and dramatic. The church is part of God's cosmic drama which at the heart is about reconciliation even in a hostile world. Christ has brought reconciliation and the church witnesses, or performs signs that point to that reconciliation. Again we will note that the Spirit is critical for Hays. Only by the Spirit can humans be transformed to witness to God's ongoing work of reconciliation in the world.

Similar to Wright, Hays sees the actions or witness of the Christian in the context of eschatology, or God's unfolding plan for the world. In the new age which has dawned in Christ, the church fits into a "cosmic drama of God's reconciliation of the world to himself."⁵⁶ The new thing which God has done in Christ – that of reconciling the world to God's self – is now given to the church. The strength to do this ministry does not come from humanity but from the new reality created in the death and resurrection of Christ. Hays notes the close proximity of the new creation and the church's ministry of reconciliation, citing 2 Corinthians 5:14b-18. ("So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away;

56. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 20.

see every thing has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”⁵⁷ It is here where Hays turns to dramatic terms for the church: “The church stands at the juncture” between the old and the new ages.⁵⁸ In more militaristic terms, he notes: “The church community is God’s eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.”⁵⁹

Hays places ethics in the same category as suffering in the context of eschatology. Suffering, as well as other human dilemmas, such as ethical behaviour, are part and parcel of living in the midst of these overlapping eras. This new world of God’s in-breaking is not some distant future hope, nor is it a panacea for suffering. At the turn of the ages the church is between joy and suffering. Nonetheless in its joy and suffering the church is a “sign, foretaste, and assurance of God’s promised redemption.”⁶⁰ The church is a sign of God’s faithful love and new creation “where the church embodies in its life together the world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ.”⁶¹ In spite of suffering, which is a characteristic of living in the overlapping and “wrenching” turn of the ages, Romans 8 shows that the Spirit still calls for confidence and rejoicing (Rom 8:9) because the suffering is not simply suffering, but suffering with and for Christ. This suffering is at the same time a sign of Christ’s reconciling love for the world (Rom 8:18-25).⁶²

For Hays, the second interlocking motif which is crucial for understanding ethics for Paul is Jesus’ death. The cross, Hays notes, is used by Paul as a “complex symbol ... encoding a rich variety of meanings.”⁶³ While Paul speaks of the cross as the pivot-point of the ages, or the place where the curse of the law is placed (Gal 3:13), or the demonstration of God’s righteousness, it is also a paradigm for ethics: “For Paul, Jesus’ death on the cross is an act of

57. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 19.

58. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 20.

59. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 27.

60. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 21.

61. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 24.

62. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 26–27.

63. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 27.

loving, sacrificial obedience that becomes paradigmatic for the obedience of all who are in Christ.” Hays continues, joining the salvific aspect of the cross with its paradigmatic features:

To be sure, the death of the Son of God on a cross is a unique event, unrepeatable, reconciling humanity to God. It is an event fraught with singular metaphysical significance, not merely an example of how people ought to live and die. Nonetheless, it does become for Paul also an example, a paradigm for the life of faith. When Paul writes in Galatians 6:2, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ,” he has taken the pattern of Christ’s self-giving (1:4, 2:20) and projected it into an imperative for the community to serve one another in love. Paul reads the cross as a metaphor for the other actions (burden-bearing) that correspond analogically to the self-giving exemplified by Jesus’ death.⁶⁴

Hays’ argument continues with the ‘paradigmatic’ features of Romans 15:1-3 (“We who are powerful ought to bear the weaker ... For Christ did not please himself ...”) and the ‘Christ hymn’ of Philippians 2:6-11. The latter, Hays notes, is the place where we may see most fully Paul’s notion of the paradigmatic significance of Jesus’s death. Here the obedience of Christ to the point of death (Phil 2.8) is clearly noted as a pattern for their obedience (Phil 2:12). Christ on the cross becomes the “exemplar” of not only obedience but also suffering and humility (Phil 2:3,8).⁶⁵

Hays carefully argues that he is not advocating a one-to-one correspondence with regard to the ‘imitation of Christ’ in his reading of Philippians 2. Rather, he advocates a “supple notion of metaphorical correspondence” in that the metaphor “always posits a startling likeness between unlike entities.” In other words,

in Philippians, Paul offers a metaphorical reading of Christ’s self-emptying and death; the power of the metaphor is precisely a function of its daring improbability, inviting the readers to see their own lives and vocations as corresponding to the gracious action of the Lord whom they acclaim and worship.⁶⁶

Imitation then, or conformity to Christ’s death is an issue of participation in Christ. The believer who is exhorted to be like Christ in suffering, obedience and humility is already “in Christ” and is therefore “animated” by the presence of Christ.⁶⁷ In other words, the obedience

64. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 27–28.

65. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 28–29.

66. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 30.

67. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 32.

of the Christian is not to be seen as obligation but as an issue of identity in Christ. Here we might say that the exhortations of Paul are not so much command as a reminder that the one who is worshipped has gone through this before and is illuminating the way.⁶⁸

A significant aspect of the paradigmatic nature of the cross for Hays is his argument, similar to Wright's and already outlined, that God's righteousness (covenant faithfulness) is demonstrated in Jesus' faith (or faithfulness) which took him to the cross. Jesus's *faithfulness* in death was able to atone for the human *faithlessness* that Adam characterized (Rom 5:12-21) and which the Law could not produce as noted in Romans 2 and 3. A part of this argument is based on translating *pistis Christo* not as "faith in Christ" but "the faith of Christ." For Hays, the emphasis with regard to faith in Romans and Galatians falls on what God has done in putting forth Jesus as one of faith rather than on human faith as response to God's grace. For Hays, this in no way discounts the reality that the human comes to God's grace "in faith" rather than with works. His overall point in advocating for "the faith of Christ" is part of a larger narrative argument: Paul is telling the story of Jesus in his letters.⁶⁹

To be clear, the argument with regard to Jesus' faith(fulness) in the context of the covenant goes like this: The unfaithfulness (*apistia*) of Israel does not make God an unfaithful covenant partner (Rom 3:3). God's faithfulness (*pistis*) is still capable of redeeming the sin of Jew and Gentile alike. Those in the state of *apistia* can be saved by one who would demonstrate God's *pistis* in his death. Therefore God has shown in the death of Christ that God is faithful to the covenant promises. Hays notes that the "faith of Jesus Christ" reading is

68. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 29.

69. In his introduction to the 2nd edition of *The Faith of Jesus Christ* Hays makes it clear that his argument for the faith of Jesus Christ is just one part of his larger narrative project which he is trying to develop. His overall point is that Paul is telling the story of Jesus in his letters. Key to this story is Jesus' own faith or obedience (xxiv). We do not lose here either the grace of God nor the importance of human faith (as opposed to works or law). In fact, as Harink points out, the faith of Christ argument gives more, not less emphasis on the saving work of God through Christ. It is not our faith that justifies, but the faith of Christ - placing the emphasis on God's action in Christ. See Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2003), 43. For a convincing argument for "faith in Jesus Christ" see "Once More, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ" in Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 249-71.

also consistent with Romans 5:15-19 where Jesus' act of faithfulness or obedience (as opposed to Adam's act of unfaithfulness) reconciles humanity to God and establishes a new reality – a new sphere – where the believer is now free from the power of sin, having been transferred to a place – in Christ – where the believer may be conformed to the pattern of Christ.⁷⁰ In that place, the believer can live a life which is “christomorphic.”⁷¹ The obedience of Christ at the cross sets a pattern for the life and faith of the believer. The cross is paradigmatic for obedience in the community that worships God, but this is an issue of identity rather than law.

Hays' third interlocking theological motif has to do with the community not as an afterthought of salvation but rather integral to it. For Hays, Paul is not simply adding some secondary community notes to a gospel that saves individuals but rather communicating that the community or the body of Christ is a “fundamental *theological* theme in his proclamation.”⁷²

Critical of past individualistic interpretations of Paul's letters, Hays points out that what has been taken to be statements for the individual Christian are really for the community. The “you” is often not singular but plural. While concerned with the lives of individuals, Paul's overall goal has to do with the church's unity as a place which prefigures and embodies God's reconciling work. For instance, the list in Galatians 5:19-21 where Paul refers to “the works of the flesh,” he is not simply listing a random catalogue of sins but naming those offenses which are against community (i.e. envy, anger, factions, etc.). On the other side, the virtues listed in Galatians have mostly to do with community building (conformity to Christ, loving mutual service, bearing one another's burdens, 5:13, 6:2).⁷³

70. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 31–32. See also 38.

71. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 46.

72. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 32.

73. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 33.

For Paul, the church is called and empowered to embody that reconciliation which is at the heart of the gospel. The church community founded by Christ is a place of transformation for the individual and the community at every turn. From the viewpoint of the turn of the ages, the church is God's mission in the world which draws on the Spirit and can thus echo the characteristics of that same God:

God is at work through the Spirit to create communities that prefigure, and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world. The fruit of God's love is the formation of communities that confess, worship, and pray together in a way that glorifies God.⁷⁴

At the same time though, doing the work of reconciliation in the world is not entirely spelled out by Paul, nor can Paul claim too much for these transformed human beings: For Paul, "to live faithfully in the time between the times is to walk a tightrope of moral discernment, claiming neither too much nor too little for God's transforming power within the community of faith."⁷⁵

The Narrative Readings of Wright and Hays: Potential and Limits

As we have seen, for Hays and Wright the connection or logic between theology and ethics in Paul is best seen in the context of Paul's Hebraic and Graeco-Roman narratives in which he lives as well as the larger theological motifs spelled out in his letters. Reading Paul in this narrative way places an emphasis on 1) the story of God's covenant faithfulness (righteousness) revealed in Christ; 2) Christ's faithful obedience on the cross as salvific *and* as paradigmatic (or prototypical) for Christian life; 3) the new community shaped "in Christ" and transformed by the Holy Spirit; and 4) the reconciling, praying, and worshipping vocation of the church in context of God's eschatological drama.

In this way of reading Paul, the indicatives and imperatives are not placed too far apart, neither are they fused. God's love and faithfulness in the revelation of Christ stands as the "prior to" and as the "basis" for imperatives. Here the imperatives are not general demands

⁷⁴. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 32.

⁷⁵. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 27.

made in a vacuum. Nor is this another new law. Christ at the cross serves as a prototype of what faith (faithfulness) in God looks like. But more, there is empowerment *in* Christ, *from* the Spirit and *in* the body of believers for those struggles which come from dealing not only with ethical dilemmas but also with suffering. In other words, the believer is participating in Christ and therefore animated by that life and that relationship in community with others.

Further, the imperatives of Paul are given more “teeth” in this reading than in those readings which reduce Paul’s imperatives “to whatever is most loving.” For instance, in Hays’ work we noted that the theme of reconciliation is strong. Reconciliation as a task for the Christian is not simply pulled out of a hat for Paul. Nor is it simply a local issue in one church to which Paul is writing. Central to God’s work in Christ is reconciliation not only of God to humans and between humans but also God with the cosmos. Those who have been reconciled to God in Christ carry in their character, through the Spirit, the way of reconciliation with them as they go about their lives.

No doubt several critiques could be raised about the above narrative approach to Paul. One could take issue with “the faith *of* Jesus Christ” rather than “faith *in* Jesus Christ,” that the believer is transformed “in Christ” not simply declared justified through Christ, or that faith is inherently social or communal. Of course one also can take issue with the entire narrative project. While I am largely in agreement with Hays and Wright in their reading I will raise four cautions which must be taken into account.

While it seems to me that “the faith *of* Jesus Christ” is a better reading, it is important to highlight again and again that salvation does come through Christ by human “faith” as an appropriate response to what God has done in Christ and not by works, or by law, or because of one’s ethnicity. Those who do read “faith *of* Jesus Christ” are not denying that humans are saved by faith, they are simply placing more emphasis on what God has done in Christ rather than on the subjective experience of human faith.

While Paul is narrating the story of lives which have been transformed by the gospel he is also aware of the power of sin and the power of a God who over-and-over frees from that sin. It is not enough to say that we are being transformed by the Spirit. Lacking in the work of Hays and Wright, at least in these readings, is the story of the juridical sense of God's saving work. However one translates "righteousness" there is a juridical sense to it. The human stands at the feet of God the judge. I favour Dunn when he cautions readers of Paul not to simply harmonize or choose, say, between "justification by faith" and "participation in Christ" language. The many metaphors and themes of Paul need to be kept in tension with each other rather than allowing one theme to subsume all the others.⁷⁶

While I agree that Paul is community-building in his letters, this should never negate the place of the reality of salvation which comes to the individual. Wright and Hays tend to highlight the social over the personal, and perhaps this is a much needed corrective. Indeed Paul is writing to communities, but he also has individuals in mind, whether he has met them or not. While the challenge to individualistic readings of Paul has been clarifying, the individual should not be lost in such readings. It may be helpful to say that salvation is personal but lived out in community. Somehow the issue of a personal faith needs to be distinguished from a faith that is individualistic.

While I largely agree with narrative readings of Paul's letters, there is always the nagging issue of particularity. Claims that Paul has the covenant in mind even though he does not use the word in Romans, need to be clearly shown. For the most part, Hays and Wright do the reader a good service as they take the wide-angle lens and give a sense of larger narrative themes and world-views. We must note however that James Dunn is sceptical of such grand narrative schemes in that they may cloud the particulars of the many texts which Paul writes. While larger narratives or theological schemes need to be considered, each text needs

76. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 410.

to be tested and seen in its own right. Some texts may confirm the grand schemes, others may only hint at them. Still others may tell an entirely different story, questioning the particular grand narrative.

A Narrative Spirituality Approach

Michael J. Gorman shares much with and draws heavily on the work of Wright and especially Hays. Gorman's work is clearly in the narrative school: the letters of Paul need to be seen in the context of the many Hebraic, Graeco-Roman and personal "narratives" that are a part of Paul's life and thought.⁷⁷ When Gorman uses the term "narrative spirituality" he is referring to a "spirituality that tells a story, a dynamic story of life with God that corresponds in some way to the Divine story."⁷⁸ For Gorman, the way of characterizing Paul's logic with regard to God's grace and Christian behaviour follows along the same lines as Wright and Hays. God's covenant faithfulness or righteousness is realized in the advent of Christ. Christ's faithful obedience (righteousness) culminating on the cross is seen as both salvific and paradigmatic for Christian behaviour.⁷⁹ Justification or the making-right of persons does not simply declare the individual righteous but leads to the transformation of the individual through the Holy Spirit.⁸⁰ Priority is given to the reconciling vocation of the church in context of God's eschatological drama.⁸¹ Also, Gorman follows Wright closely with his political reading of Paul's Jesus and in some ways develops this further.⁸² In addition to these

77. Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 115–30

78. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 4.

79. Gorman, *Cruciformity*. Gorman defends his use of the subjective genitive or "the faith of Jesus Christ" over "the faith in Jesus Christ" in his chapter entitled "Cruciform Faith I," 95-121. He draws heavily here on the work of Hays.

80. Gorman, *Cruciformity*. See the chapter entitled "Cruciform Love (III): The Narrative Shape of the Christian Community, 214-267.

81. Gorman, *Cruciformity*. See the chapter entitled "Cruciform Hope: The Future of Cruciformity," 304-348.

82. Gorman, *Cruciformity*. See the chapter entitled "Communities of Cruciformity: Paul's Experience and Vision of the Church," 349-367.

similarities, Gorman develops the connection between “participation in Christ” and Christian ethics, as we shall see below.

I will limit myself here to two contributions that Gorman develops which aid in understanding the connection between Paul’s theology and ethics. The title *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* in many ways says it all. I will explore here what Gorman means by “spirituality” and “cruciformity” and how his development of these terms helps in discerning how Paul’s theology and ethics are joined.

Spirituality

Gorman goes farther than Hays and Wright on the issue of spirituality and what this may mean for connecting God’s grace and Christian behaviour in Paul’s letters. As noted above, Hays and Wright have rightly connected ethics with God’s prior action in Christ as well as with prayer, worship, and even spirituality. For Gorman, any discussion of Pauline theology and ethics (or any discussion of Paul for that matter) needs to be viewed in the context of Paul’s cross-shaped *spirituality*. Gorman’s project questions any strict categories like ‘theology’ and ‘ethics’ in Paul – especially when they are pitted against each other. He argues that the term spirituality is more comprehensive than ethics and theology but nonetheless includes both.⁸³ Reading Paul as one who is living out a spiritual life based on the cross of Christ naturally brings theological issues and ethics together. Paul is a Christian and embodies his beliefs. In practical terms, Paul is not primarily either a theologian or an ethicist. Paul is, by his own definition an apostle and a servant of the Lord (Rom 1:1) who is living out or embodying (and writing about) the patterns of the cross of Christ.

What Gorman sees writ large in Paul is neither his ethics nor his theology but Paul’s spirituality – or his “lived experience” of the gospel. Paul is seen here as one who over and over again has a “fondness for narrating his religious experience.”⁸⁴ For instance, when Paul

83. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 115.

84. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 3.

states to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 2:2, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ – this is Jesus Christ crucified,” he is speaking of his spiritual experience. To “know” Christ is not merely an issue of intellectual assent but an experience – an experience of the triune God.⁸⁵ This lived experience of the gospel which Paul shares with the churches is one of spirituality rather than ethics or theology, even though they are both included. The purpose of Paul’s letters, Gorman contends, is “not to teach theology but to mold behaviour” because those who have been moved from being “in sin” to “in Christ” (Rom 6:23) live in a different way than those around them (Rom 1 and 2).⁸⁶ Even here, though, Paul’s “formation of behaviour” is not to be seen as ethics in the modern sense but rather in the wider sense of spirituality. For Paul, the behaviour of the Christian is continuous with their cruciform spirituality. Paul, seen in the context of his lived spirituality, stresses “the inseparability of gospel with life, of believing and living, of relations with God and relations with others.”⁸⁷

Because “spirituality” can mean virtually anything in current language, Gorman spells out clearly that Paul’s spirituality is based entirely on the Holy Spirit as attested to in scripture. For Gorman the primary work of the Spirit is to shape and mould the spiritual life of the Christian *in the direction of the cross*. He notes, “the primary work and sign of the Spirit is to keep believers connected to the cross of Christ.”⁸⁸ For instance the Corinthian correspondence demonstrates what happens when the Spirit is understood as freedom in the context of Christ’s exaltation without reference to the cross. Paul informs the Corinthians that freedom in Christ needs to be connected to both the cross and the exaltation. The super apostles noted in 2 Corinthians lack a sense of the Spirit which is centered on the cross and on the power present in the paradoxical weakness of the cross (2 Cor 11 and 12).⁸⁹ The “cruciform Spirit” is one of freedom *from* sin and *for* acts of love – as demonstrated by the

85. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 1.

86. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 4.

87. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 115.

88. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 125.

89. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 60.

cross. The Spirit marks freedom which is “*from* bondage either to the self ... or to law ... and *for* the service of God and others (Gal 5:1-15).”⁹⁰ This cruciform spirituality is one of “walking with Spirit” rather than with the flesh (Gal 5:16).⁹¹ This cruciform spirituality places the Christian in a different sphere – that of the Spirit.

For Gorman, in Paul’s spirituality the cross and the Spirit have a special link. The primary role of the Spirit is to bring the individual Christian and the church to the cross. The spirituality lived out at the cross is one that includes behaviours which are in keeping with the cross itself. Gorman will go as far as to say that “the Spirit is not so much transformative as that which is associated with bringing us to the cross which transforms us.”⁹² In other words, for Gorman, while his notion of spirituality looms large, it only provides the context for the content of that spirituality which is a “cruciform” spirituality. Thus, to Gorman’s discussion of Paul’s cruciform spirituality we now turn. We have said that the Spirit conforms the believer and her behaviour to the cross. What behaviours are we talking about?

Cruciformity

According to Gorman, at every turn Paul is sharing his experience of the cross of Christ. He is not communicating a theology of the cross as much as showing and telling the story of the cross as experienced and lived. As noted above, Paul is not so much “informing” with theology as trying to “form” the body of believers with his own experience of the gospel. For Paul, the cross and resurrection have ushered the believer from the sphere of sin and into the sphere of Christ (Rom 5 and 6).⁹³ But the ongoing power of the cross for the Christian does not stop at the entrance into the sphere of Christ and the Spirit. The cross continues to be a pattern for the believer as the believer joins with Christ in death and resurrection. How is the cross a pattern or prototype for the Christian?

90. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 125.

91. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 126.

92. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 60.

93. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 127.

Paul's spirituality – the life he embodies and communicates to the churches – has to do with being conformed to Christ, and in particular to being conformed to Christ's death on the cross. Gorman here goes beyond Hays' notion of "Christophormic" with a more specific term: "cruciformity." God comes in Christ in a the cruciform shape of self-giving love as demonstrated on the cross. For Gorman, the cross is not simply something that one believes in but something that one *lives*, or better, *lives into*, by the power of the Spirit. That is, the imitation of Christ which Paul lives out is not one where he outwardly seeks to imitate the actions of Christ. Rather, imitation is more mystical or spiritual. It is "something that has happened to him" simply because he is in Christ.⁹⁴ It is not automatic, but, like Wright states, a gift of the Spirit.

Key to Gorman's thesis are those Pauline texts which refer the death of Jesus or to the cross. He divides texts into those which have Jesus as subject/actor/protagonist (e.g. Rom 6:10, "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God."), God as subject/actor/protagonist (e.g. Rom 6:4, ... "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father."), and both Jesus and God as subject/actor/protagonist (e.g. 1 Cor 15:3-4: ... "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised [by God] on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.")⁹⁵ The multidimensional pictures or "narrative patterns" of the cross which comes to the fore include 1) the obedience/faithfulness of Christ (Phil 2:8); 2) love (Gal 2:20); 3) grace (Rom 5:15); 4) altruism/sacrifice (Gal 1:4); 5) substitution (2 Cor 5:21); 6) self-giving (Gal 2:20); 7) voluntary self-humbling/abasement (Rom 15:3); 8) the story of incarnation and suffering (Rom 8.17); 9) paradoxical power and wisdom (2 Cor 13.4); 10) interchange (2 Cor 8:9); 11) apocalyptic victory and liberation for new life (1 Thess 5:9-10); 12) reconciliation and

94. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 48.

95. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 76–81.

justification (Rom 5:18-19); and 13) suffering as prelude to resurrection/exaltation (Rom 6:4,9).⁹⁶

Some of the above narrative patterns come together in a number of Paul's passages but according to Gorman nearly all of the above come together in "Paul's master story of the cross" which is Philippians 2:6-11. Paul uses this early church hymn as a centre piece of his cruciform spirituality.⁹⁷ Gorman admits that the strongest narrative patterns in Phil 2:6-11 are numbers 1 (faithfulness/obedience of Christ), 6 (self-giving), 7 (voluntary self-humbling), 8 (incarnation and suffering), and 13 (suffering as prelude to resurrection/exaltation).⁹⁸ Gorman takes as a given that 2:6-11 is to be read in the context of the strong themes of love (2), grace (3), altruism (5) and paradoxical power and wisdom (9) in Philippians.⁹⁹

With Philippians 2:6-11 as Paul's master narrative – giving us most of Paul's patterns of the cross in one place – Gorman also helpfully reduces the above thirteen narrative patterns of the cross to 'cruciform' faith (1), love (2-8), power (9-12), and hope (13).¹⁰⁰ With these key narrative themes Gorman then proceeds to show that Paul is living out and communicating a spirituality which has as its heart the patterns of the cross. The daily lives of Christians – as they are drawn to the cross of Christ through the spirit – live a life of faith (faithfulness), love, hope, and power. We will turn briefly to what Gorman means by faith, love, hope and power.

The faith Paul speaks of is most certainly the response of the person to Christ's free gift of salvation. Faith for Gorman is a "fundamental stance" in that the individual is looking to the cross rather than away from it on a daily basis. It follows that this faith "in Christ" looks different than faith in either the law, the flesh, the self or the empire. That Christ demonstrated an obedient faith to God in his death not only grants salvation but also continues to

96. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 82–87.

97. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 88–90.

98. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 91.

99. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 92.

100. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 93.

“apprehend”¹⁰¹ the individual – ever drawing her into the obedient faith of Christ.¹⁰²

The love which Paul speaks of and lives out is a love patterned after Jesus Christ. It is a love that is one of giving, as Christ gave. Gorman reiterates throughout his work that Jesus went to the cross out of love which was sacrificial (Rom 8:34), self-giving (Gal 2:20) and status denouncing (Phil 2:6-8). Key to Gorman's thesis here is that Paul – to the extent that he is being conformed to Christ – is living out an echo of this cruciform love. For instance, in an analogous way to Christ, Paul renounces his rights and his class as a Roman citizen to do the work of tent-making – a lower class occupation.¹⁰³ That he is a servant or slave of Christ means that he takes the freedom to practice love in the form of status renunciation.¹⁰⁴ Gorman parallels Jesus' status renunciation in Phil 2:7 (“Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be exploited”) with Paul's own claims to his own status renunciation. In 1 Cor 9:12b Paul claims of him and his fellow pastors that they “did not make use” of a particular right. Here in this echo, and many others which Gorman presents,¹⁰⁵ we see Paul living out the pattern of Jesus' love in particular ways and then encouraging the churches in this very direction. For Gorman, Paul is attempting in his life and letters to show what the pattern of the cross looks like in his own life and in the life of the congregation. Gorman puts Paul's embodiment of the cross in dramatic terms:

For Paul, to be in Christ is to be a living exegesis of this narrative of Christ, a new performance of the original drama of exaltation following humiliation, of humiliation as the voluntary renunciation of rights and selfish gain in order to serve and obey.¹⁰⁶

Paul is aware of the *power* of the gospel in relation to the power of the law, the flesh and the Roman empire. That the individual is “in Christ” though makes all of the difference. The Christian is surrounded and indwelled by Christ and not by sin. For Gorman, it is in this

101. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 13.

102. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 113.

103. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 181.

104. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 183.

105. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 192, 197, 224.

106. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 92. His emphasis.

sphere of Christ where transformation happens. He notes that “radical moral transformation is the norm for those who embrace God in Christ.”¹⁰⁷ But this moral transformation is Christ’s work, for which the believer can not boast.

Finally a cruciform spirituality is one that hopes in times of suffering that God will vindicate the righteous. Again, this pattern can be seen in the cross and exaltation of Christ. Dying and rising in Christ (Rom 6:1-11), as well as the humiliation and exaltation of Christ (Phil 2:6-11) are patterns that speak of the resurrection which follows the cross.¹⁰⁸ The church can witness to this cruciform hope for it has received and been shown something of the future which God will bring.¹⁰⁹ The church for Gorman, as he reads Paul, is a counter-cultural body, for its “charter” is cruciform, which goes contrary to the way things are in the realm of sin. Nonetheless the church, within and outside its walls, is self-giving and practices renunciation of status following the pattern of the cross. In this way “churches are living commentaries on their master story.”¹¹⁰

Like Hays and Wright, Gorman enjoys placing Paul’s view of the church in dramatic terms. The church is God’s “spectacle” or a “theatrical performance” of the cross as the life-giving power of God.¹¹¹ Similar to Hays, the social nature of the church is not a secondary function to the salvation of individuals. The church is “what God is up to in the world: re-creating a people whose corporate life tells the world what the death and resurrection of the Messiah is all about.”¹¹²

The Possibilities of Cruciform Narrative Spirituality

The term “spirituality” as Gorman spells it out has benefits for the study of the relationship between God’s grace and Christian ethics. Works which focus more on the

107. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 299.

108. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 322.

109. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 354.

110. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 366.

111. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 366.

112. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 367.

theology of Paul (Dunn) or the ethics of Paul (Horsley) tend to divide Paul the person (and indeed all of humanity) along the lines of “thinking” or “believing” on the one hand and “doing” on the other, of theology, and of practice. Humanity must be spoken of in terms that combine not separate thinking and doing.¹¹³ The term “spirituality” unites the indicatives and imperatives in Paul in a way that puts the various parts of the “self” in continuity. Yes, the believer struggles with sins which are not in keeping with the faith that he has. In this context though Paul is communicating that by the power of God through Christ it is possible to overcome the divisions of the divided self as the Spirit draws the believer to the patterns of the cross in the sphere of Christ. Like Wright and Hays, but even more so, Gorman’s narrative spirituality has a way of integrating Paul’s theology and ethics, or indicatives and imperatives, which have sometimes been torn asunder.

“Cruciformity” as Gorman defines and uses it, is a handy term for integrating the salvific and paradigmatic aspects of the cross together with the actual lived life of the believer. Hays and Gorman are both struggling with how to say that the cross is both salvific and at the same time a pattern for Christian life. In both cases, it is clear that the work of conforming of the believer to Christ is done by the Spirit and not by the believer. Hays’ term “Christophormic” and Gorman’s term “cruciformity” are both capable ways of capturing the conforming power of Christ. “Cruciform” says more directly: it is Christ on the cross to which the believers are being conformed. This raises the same question though which gets raised for any scholar who concentrates on the cross: what about the resurrection? A good question, and one, and that Gorman has to deal with repeatedly. The cross and resurrection are well integrated in Gorman’s work. The cross only makes sense in light of the resurrection. Indeed both seem to represent and refer to each other in Paul’s own writings. Again, part of the issue

113. I place Gorman within the school of scholars who have attempted to communicate Paul’s faith, rather than his theology - realizing that these two notions have slippery definitions, overlap, and are difficult to differentiate. Daniel Patte attempts to discover the “structure” of Paul’s faith in *Paul’s Faith and the Power of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). Terence Donaldson looks at Paul’s “convictions” in *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). See 29-49.

is that all Christians struggle with the mystery of how to speak of the cross and resurrection, of dying to the old and living to the new, in dynamic relation to each other.

Having one central image places us in a different scholarly place than where Hays and Wright are, with their three narratives or theological motifs that interact with each other. Gorman insists – but with a healthy sense of humour – that “cruciformity” is not a centre as such, but if centre language is insisted on, then it fits the bill.¹¹⁴ I follow Gorman in large part when he states that cruciformity is a centre which can easily integrate the many other narratives, motifs and images which Paul tries to discuss and live out. But again, the work of Dunn needs to be considered here. Easy harmonization around a master story (Phil 2:6-9) or a term like “cruciformity” does not necessarily tell the entire story nor does it let some of Paul’s other motifs or metaphors live in tension with one another or stand on their own.¹¹⁵

For Gorman the love of the triune God and the love within the human community is given shape. Above we noted that some ethical treatments of Paul advocate love but in an ambiguous way. Love has little teeth and all of Paul’s imperatives get reduced to “whatever is loving.” Gorman’s analysis of Paul’s multivalent way of speaking about the cross (and echoing the cross in his own life) is helpful in our attempt here to integrate theology and ethics. Gorman is helpful in spelling out the many ways in which the cross features in Paul’s indicatives and imperatives. We could say it this way: Love is first of all God’s doing, and then it is what Christ performed on the cross. But it does not stop there. Paul has been apprehended in mind, spirit and body by a particular kind of love. The love given to the believer and the love which is called for in the life of the community of believers is not a general kind of love but something with shape: a cruciform shape. The shape of that love is not simply theoretical for Paul but something that he is living out and indicating that others should imitate. This love has teeth – it has its roots in the cross and takes off from there to

114. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 368–72.

115. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 396.

include human reconciliation, status renunciation, love of enemy, radical hospitality, and even dying in the place of others. It makes sense to call this Paul's "lived faith" or spirituality.

Part II: The Logic of Grace and Obedience in Romans 5-6

As the first section of this study demonstrates, Romans 5 and 6 are key chapters where scholars have found major and varying insights into how Paul is dealing with God's grace in relation to Christian behaviour. I now offer a reading of these two chapters in an effort to view up-close one instance of how Paul characterizes the logic of God's grace and Christian behaviour.

A surface reading of Romans shows that Paul pauses in his argument in 5-8 in an effort to head-off questions which he presumes his readers want to ask regarding God's grace and Christian obedience. Paul has made such a celebrative case of the grace of God – as justifying, reconciling, superabundant, and gift – that his implied readers can not help but ask, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (Rom 6:1) and "May we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (Rom 6:15). While stated in the light of negative behaviour ("Shall we *sin*?" or "Is it even *sin* because we are under grace?") rather than positive ("Given God's abundant grace, shall we still do good?" or "Now that the law is 'done' for us, what are good actions?") the issue is still a paradoxical one of Christian agency in relation to a God who accepts the human without works. Paul addresses this issue in Romans 5-6 by covering a host of topics (e.g. righteousness, death, sin, Adam, Christ, grace, reconciliation, baptism, gift, life, and slavery) in a few tight paragraphs. I am not declaring these two chapters as a kind of summation of Paul's on-the-move pastoral theology. At the same time, looking at Paul's argument in these two chapters in their context will give us one good picture of Paul's notion of God's grace in relation to Christian action, and may give some clues to moving grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon.

As I look to Romans 5 and 6 I will be incorporating the work of Rosner, Wright, Hays, and Gorman described above, in addition to other scholars. I read Romans 5 and 6 with eyes

open to narratives, such as ‘covenant and creation,’ and ‘gospel and empire,’ as well as theological motifs such as ‘the cross and Jesus’ obedience,’ as well as the transformative nature of the Spirit as it relates to Christian behaviour, the spherical or locative nature of the new creation, and the way the Spirit draws the Christian to the cross.

While I will make reference to what has been learned in Part I of this chapter, I will be framing this reading of Romans 5 and 6 with one main theme at the fore. I will argue that in addition to the *temporal* arguments which Paul is making here about the Christian life (old era “in Adam”/new era “in Christ”) his argument is also *spatial*. That is, the Adam/Christ contrast (5:12-21), as well as other contrasts which Paul is making here, have to do with location and space. By being “in Christ” believers are in a new place or sphere where the power of sin no longer dominates. It is only because of the reality of this sphere, where the Spirit is dwelling, that Paul can speak of obedience. It is only in this sphere where grace has been “poured out” by God that the Christian is empowered to live a life of obedience. It is only in the context of this sphere that Paul can give the imperatives which he gives in Romans 12-15. In Romans 5 and 6 Paul describes the character of this sphere (e.g. grace, gift, peace, reconciliation), speaks of how it came about (e.g. through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection), how it is that one has access to this sphere (e.g. baptism, Spirit), what it means for Christian behaviour (e.g. presenting themselves to God and not to sin) and to whom one directs one’s obedience in this realm (Christ, not Sin).

I will first make a few comments regarding Romans 5 and 6 in the context of the book of Romans, especially its context within 5-8. Secondly, I will read Romans 5 and 6 with reference to the *spatial* argument which Paul is making. As noted in Part I of this study, one way to look at Paul’s logic on God’s grace and Christian behaviour has to do with the “in Christ” transformative sphere in which the Christian has entered and now lives: in this space, and empowered by Christ, here is what life looks like. In the first reading of this second section I will closely follow N. T. Wright’s spatial and geographical reading of Romans 5-8.

In order to show that God is righteous and that God will glorify those who are justified, Paul is taking the Roman believers on a walk with the Israelites from Egypt and into freedom, as a way to show that God has kept and is keeping the covenant promise. Just as God promised deliverance from Egypt, and then from the desert, so God will do this for believers in the new realm. In the second part of this second section I will look to each of the four sections of Romans 5 and 6 with reference to spatial words, concepts, and metaphors. Following these readings I will offer a conclusion to Paul's argument in Romans 5 and 6 and how this aids in helping us understand his logic for connecting God's grace to Christian obedience.

Romans 5 and 6 in the Context of Romans

In each of the major sections in Romans (1-4, 5-8, 9-11, and 12-16) Paul uses specific rhetoric and metaphors as he argues for the faithfulness of God in Christ. The subtitle of Katherine Grieb's monograph style commentary on Romans reads, "A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness."¹¹⁶ According to Grieb, Paul is using many stories, metaphors, and models to show that God indeed is righteous despite the reality that Christ has come aside from the law, that Jews and Gentiles are now together and struggling with each other, and that even "in Christ" there is suffering and tribulation. It is in the midst of these and other issues that Paul is assuring the believers in Rome of their place in God's sure promises – God's righteousness.¹¹⁷

While Paul has argued in Romans 1:18 - 4:25 that Gentiles as well as Jews are all in the realm of sin and can only be saved through faith by God in Christ, Paul has spoken little of what the exact role of Christ is in this new realm in relation to the daily life of the believer. He has also spoken little about what justification or righteousness actually means for the on-going

¹¹⁶ Katherine A. Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

¹¹⁷ Toews, *Romans*, 20–28, 400–07. See also Wright's introduction to Romans in N.T. Wright, *Romans*, vol. X of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 395–408.

life of the believer. Paul will respond to the question of the place of the Jews more fully in 9-11 and will give practical insights into the life of the Christian in 12-16. But here in 5-8 Paul takes a step back to pick up some themes from Romans 1-4 in order to show what it means to be justified in Christ apart from the law. Here we have something of the “logic” of God’s grace and Christian ethics. Toews’ title for Romans 5-8 reads, “The Meaning of the Revelation of the Righteousness of God.”¹¹⁸ Wright’s title for the same section is “God’s People in Christ as the New Humanity.”¹¹⁹ Both titles sum up this section well, even though their language is different. Paul is now showing the benefits, meaning, and character of what it is to be to “made righteous” by the God who has shown righteousness in Christ. In other words, “in Christ,” in this new sphere, there is assurance of salvation, and there is also a new way of life characterized by the one in whom they now live.¹²⁰ Given this new life in this new sphere, why would they want to go back to the old sphere, the old sins?

Chapter 5 begins by noting that peace, grace, and reconciliation with God are benefits of justification. This has been brought about by the “one man Jesus Christ,” whose obedience to God “more than” undoes the transgression of the one man who introduced sin to the world (5:12-20). But in Paul’s over-the-top description of God’s grace (5:15-20), the question comes to the fore, shall we sin so that grace may abound? (6:1) Paul’s answer to this question is a firm “no,” and a description about the way the believer has been joined with Christ’s death and resurrection (6:4-6). Those who are joined to Christ in this way are no longer slaves to sin, but rather “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). What does being alive to God mean? It

118. Toews, *Romans*, 132.

119. Wright, *Romans*, 508.

120. Given the scholars in part one of this chapter and their characterization of the transformative nature of the Spirit of God in the Christian life, it is clear that I am working with an understanding that God’s righteousness is an imparted reality. Hays, Wright, and Gorman assume that persons can change their ethical behaviour given the ongoing work of the Spirit. This differs from some Lutheran understandings, where God’s righteousness is characterized as imputed. That is, God’s righteousness covers the individual but that righteousness still remains alien. On imputed righteousness as characterized in Romans 5-6 see Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 172–75. We will note below that the Lutheran Oswald Bayer defends the alien righteousness of God but also makes the case that the Spirit changes Christian behaviour.

means that sin does not reign in their bodies – their bodies are to be “presented as tools of righteousness to God” because they are “under grace” (6:12-14).

But now a second question raises its ugly head? Now that the believer is in the sphere of Christ, and not in the sphere of sin where the law resides (5:20, 6:14), are there no laws to break and therefore no real sins? Again, we get a “no” from Paul, but this time his response is from the metaphor of slavery. They were once enslaved to sin but now are enslaved to righteousness (6:15-18). I take 7:1-6 as another way of answering the question about law and sin in 6:15 from the perspective of marriage. His emphasis here again is on the being joined to Christ and now free from sin “so as to serve in newness of Spirit” (7:6). Wright suggests that in 7:7-25 Paul is making a *general* characterization of life in the realm of sin. The “I” according to Wright is not Paul presenting his own life in the new realm; rather, we are listening here to a view of the Adamic realm.¹²¹ The characterization here is of one who is “captive to the law of sin” (7:23), not one who is alive in Christ and in the new realm.

Paul concludes in Romans 8 with many of the same themes and metaphors which have been discussed in 5-7 (e.g. law, death, sin, peace, freedom, and life) but now all of these themes are placed within the context of the work of the Spirit. The Spirit mentioned in 5:5 as having been given by God is now described in a more fulsome way. The Spirit has put to death the deeds of the body (8:12), has confirmed with the believer’s spirit that they are “sons of God” (8:15), is dwelling in them (8:11), helps them in weakness, and intercedes for them (8:27). Also, those issues brought up in chapter 5:1-11 such as suffering, condemnation as well as hope and glorification are treated more fully in chapter 8 in a celebrative way. Glory will more than replace suffering (8:18) and the believers can hope in glorification, eternal life, and the restoration of all creation (8:23-25). The believers can hope in that there is no condemnation or wrath for the heirs of God. Nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (8:35-39).

121. Wright, *Romans*, 512.

As the above surface sketch shows, generally following Wright, Grieb, and Toews, Romans 5-8 can be characterized as a defense of God's righteousness in the context of the life lived in Christ. The God who has justified will glorify. God's promises can be trusted not only in suffering but also in gathering the believers into a place where they are being made righteous in conformity to Christ (5:1; 8:29). This is a place where Sin holds no power because it has been put to death.¹²² They are now free to be obedient "from the heart"(6:17) and to present their former sinful members (6:13) to God, the gracious benefactor who has justified them. God is good and this can be witnessed to in their lives of worship, hope, and obedience.

Thus, Romans 5-8 is firstly about God, Christ, and the Spirit and how the triune God can be trusted to move humanity from justification to glorification. The God who justifies will glorify. God's promises are true. In the meantime suffering will take place, but in a new place – a place of assurance, hope, worship, and obedience.

Spatial Readings

Having taken a brief look at Romans 5-6 in larger context we now move to two readings which look to the spatial aspects of this text. In the first section I look to Wright's characterization of the journey from Egypt to the desert and then on to Canaan. Romans 5-8 has behind it the people of God's journey from Egypt to the desert where they expect to enter the land of milk and honey. Secondly, I do my own reading of Romans 5-6 noting how Paul is using metaphors and language of proximity, location, and space to describe the logic of God's grace and Christian behaviour.

122. Toews, *Romans*, 157, 409–13. Toews distinguishes between Sin and sin and writes one with a capital 's' and one with a small 's'. Sin is a power characteristic of that sphere which also includes Death (5:12-21). The law does not rescue people from Sin as a power but does help define the nature of that power (5:13-14). Here Sin (*hamartia*) is to be distinguished from sin (*parabasis*) which is personal transgression. Personal transgression are a part of the Christian life, but the power Sin is in contrast to the sphere of grace. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 275.

A Geographical Reading of Romans 5-8

N. T. Wright postulates a reading of Romans 5-8 which is spatial and dynamic in its orientation. This section of Romans he reads as the “new exodus:” The story of the Hebrew people moving from Egypt to the promised land is the primary narrative which provides the substructure for this telling of how God has saved humanity with a new exodus in Christ. Just as God saved the people from slavery, brought them into the wilderness, and then to the land of Israel, so God’s new people are being delivered in an analogous way. This is another way of saying that the God who justifies will glorify. The God who grants an exodus, and a new space of freedom, will also grant the Promised land.¹²³

Wright works backward from chapter 8 to chapter 5. The spirit of slavery and the spirit of adoption in 8:15 recalls Israel in Egypt and then Israel in the wilderness. He notes that Deuteronomy 14:1 is behind this contrast. Paul is reminding the believers that just as the Israelites wanted to go back to slavery rather than live in the desert, so the believers sometimes feel the same way with regard to going back to the sphere of sin which formerly enslaved them. But God has called the believers “heirs” now and is promising them the fulfillment of a new covenant which includes not just a literal tract of land but new inheritance for them as well as for all of creation and the cosmos (8:21).¹²⁴

This move from slavery to the wilderness is also echoed in 6:16 where Paul speaks of the “slave masters” who have kept people in a place of death. But now in Christ there is a new enslavement: one that – like the wilderness – is one of freedom that also includes suffering and a new obedience. The baptism metaphor of 6:1-15 becomes a reminder of the passage through the Red Sea. In that passage they went through the water and consequently travelled from death to new life. Wright notes here that 1 Corinthians 10:2 also links baptism to the

123. Wright, *Romans*, 510. Grieb also notes the connection between being enslaved to death and sin in Romans and the enslavement to Pharaoh in Exodus. *The Story of Romans*, 39.

124. Wright, *Romans*, 511.

Red Sea escape.¹²⁵

Chapter 7 of Romans is seen in this proposal as a way to speak to the issue of the law given the advent of Christ. Paul does this by evoking the Torah given at Mt. Sinai. Paul's purpose here is to "exonerate the Torah from blame" while also showing that the life intended by the law is shown in Christ and the Spirit.¹²⁶ Moving back to Romans 5:12-21, Wright notes that Paul has evoked here the Adam/Christ contrast as a way to show that the inheritance once given to Adam has now been handed over to the Messiah. Adam was given the whole of creation and the glory that went with its care. But in its disobedience humanity lost this inheritance. But the Messiah, who was obedient, was able to give back that glory and inheritance to humanity. Again, we are reminded that Christ did what Adam and the Torah could not do.¹²⁷

Romans 5:1-11 is then read as the introduction to the journey which follows. The God who justifies will glorify, but the way is one of suffering as well as hope. Just as God was with the people of old in a pillar of fire, so God is with the believers through the Holy Spirit which is pouring love into their hearts.¹²⁸

This brief summary of Wright's proposal gives us one possible narrative which stands behind Romans 5-8. This geographic way of telling the story of Romans 5-8 highlights the new place wherein Christians now live, move and have their being. Having been freed from slavery they are moving to the promised land in community and with their loving God. The temptation to go back is not new, and is understandable. Paul asks here, why go back to bondage when you now have freedom? Why go back when the Promised land is in sight? This way of characterizing the dynamic space in which the believers dwell is just one way of looking at location and movement in Romans 5-6.

125. Wright, *Romans*, 512.

126. Wright, *Romans*, 512.

127. Wright, *Romans*, 512.

128. Wright, *Romans*, 513.

A Spatial Reading of Romans 5-6

I will now work through the four sections of Romans 5-6 with place, location and proximity in mind. Many scholars, including those noted above, note that one of the main features of Romans 5-8 is the “in Christ” or participation language which is used here. Paul is developing an argument here for the “in Christ” sphere in which the Christian is made righteous or transformed. I contend here that Paul is using an abundance of proximity indicators in words such as “access,” “stand,” “reign,” “under grace,” “under law,” “joined with,” “in Christ,” “lords it over,” and “enslaved” to point out not only where the believer is located in God’s eschatological plan (i.e. not “in sin” or “in Adam” but “in Christ” or “in righteousness”), but also to describe the character of the sphere. The benefits of the sphere (e.g. peace, reconciliation, and grace) are gifts which transform the believer so that they may “walk in newness of life.” That the believer is in this sphere offers them assurance as well as hope and empowerment to be obedient to the Lord of the sphere, and to present their members to God as tools of righteousness.

As we shall see, the grace of God which provides this space empowers Christian obedience to the master. Grace and obedience are not two sides of the same coin but more intimately related. The “grace” of chapter 5 is knit together in the same sphere as the “obedience” assumed in chapter 6. In other words, indicatives and imperatives, while they can be distinguished from each other, are in the same sphere in Christ. God’s grace which pervades the sphere is foundational, and the obedience which is called for is the human manifestation and witness of that same sphere.

Romans 5:1-11: Moving into graceland

The words of proximity which leap out initially are “access” and “stand.” Justification brings peace. But more, “through our Lord Jesus Christ” we “also have obtained access into this grace in which we stand” (5:1). The verb ἵστημι is here used in the perfect denoting not a

one time standing in grace but the ongoing or enduring effects of standing in that grace. The believer can thus continually boast and hope in the glory of God (5:2). *Χάρις* in v.2, in 5:17 (two times), as well as its variant in the word translated as “gift” in 5:16 suggests that Paul is defining the sphere primarily under the rubric of grace. It is by God’s grace that this sphere exists at all.¹²⁹ As Andre du Toit puts it, Paul is saying here that the believers “have become citizens of graceland.”¹³⁰

What is this “graceland” like? I take the bulk of Romans 5-8 to be a description of what this graceland is, and what it is not. In the first instance though, Paul notes the benefits of the sphere. It is a place of peace (5:1) and hope (5:2) “where the love of God has been poured into our hearts,” where shame is not present, and where “the Holy Spirit has been given to us.” (5:5) This is a sum of the benefits of graceland which will be spelled out more as Paul proceeds, the climax of which comes in chapter 8 with a deluge of the benefits of this location.

Another locative or spatial metaphor used for this standing in grace that of being welcomed into a room by Jesus with echoes of standing in the temple: “The metaphor envisages grace as a room into which Jesus has ushered all who believe.”¹³¹

But this place, as Paul characterizes it, call it a room, or a land, or a new temple, does not remove the Christian from the cares of the world, lest some believers think that graceland

129. Stephan J. Joubert, “ΧΑΡΙΣ In Paul: An Investigation Into the Apostle’s ‘Performative’ Application of the Language of Grace Within the Framework of His Theological Reflection on the Event/Process of Salvation,” in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspective on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Boston: Brill, 2005), 202. Joubert uses spatial language throughout his work to describe Paul’s use of *χαρις*. The sphere of grace, he notes throughout, is not a static place but dynamic, having to do with God’s process with humanity. God’s grace is continually working in the lives of believers in this new sphere (204-205). Dunn is less interested in the spatial aspects of grace here. He notes that it is rare for Paul to note grace as a sphere or state as he does in 5:2. Generally, Dunn highlights the temporal aspects of this text rather than the spatial. See Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 250, 254, 292.

130. Andrie B. du Toit, “Shaping a Christian Lifestyle in the Roman Capital,” in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 142.

131. Wright, *Romans*, 516. Dunn argues not so much for a temple reference here with regard to “grace” and “standing” but rather a king or monarch image. Those standing in grace have access to the king and all that the king has. *Romans 1–8*, 263.

is a sheltered bubble. There are “tribulations” or “suffering” which must be “endured” (5:4). Yet this suffering produces character and hope in God through Christ. Paul will soon mention Jesus’ suffering (5:7, 9-10), linking Jesus’ suffering to theirs.

How has this place come to be? Paul begins answering this question by showing the nature of the one who does what a righteous man would not do. A righteous man would die for a good man, but who would die for weak ones (5:6), or sinners (5:8), or even enemies (5:10)? The answer is that God loves so much that God would demonstrate this love through Christ (5:8), God’s son (5:10), justifying with the blood of Jesus (5:10).

The last verse of this section with its use of the word “reconciliation” brings us back to the first verse and highlights again the character of the grace of God. The mention of “peace” in 5:1 does not simply denote calmness or serenity but rather a cessation of open hostility or warfare. God’s grace is so great that God will give, as a free gift, peace and reconciliation even to enemies (5:10), those who are in direct opposition to God.

Paul’s use of “peace,” following the work of Wright and Gorman, may conjure up the way “peace” was used in the context of the Roman empire. The peace of God as a reconciling, free gift of grace is entirely other than the peace or *Pax Romana* offered by the empire where “peace” meant conversely that wars were being waged against enemies in far flung lands so that there would be peace and security for the privileged. The contrast of the meaning of peace within these two spheres could not be greater.¹³² Further, following Gorman, one wonders how much Paul is narrating here of his own experience. Paul was once an enemy of God as a persecutor of Christians (Acts 9:1-2), but now he has been given access to the grace in which he now stands. Perhaps Paul is narrating something of the miraculous nature of his own transference or “emigration” from a sphere of violence into a new sphere of peace.

132. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 247,263. Dunn mentions little of the connection to peace in the context of the Roman empire. He notes rather the connection between peace and righteousness in the covenant. The peace expected in the covenant is now being fulfilled (247). Also, in Christ the meaning of peace has expanded now from its former meaning related to peace for Israel established nationalistically and militaristically. This new peace includes both Jew and Gentile – embracing all nations and persons (263).

Romans 5:12-21: Moving From the Sphere of Sin to the Sphere of Grace

The main contrast in this section has to do with two reigns or spheres, one characterized by Adam and one by Christ. The verb βασιλευω, “to rule,” has spatial as well as temporal qualities to it. Reign defines space which has qualities and denotes a particular kind of power as well as leadership. The argument here is that the reign of Sin, represented¹³³ in Adam has been “more than” countered by the reign of Christ. Because of the entrance of sin into the world and its continuing existence all are forced to live in this reign. Sin is here seen not as individual trespasses but rather a power which makes claims on those within its sphere, the primary effect being death.¹³⁴ It was Jesus’ act of obedience which was able to “more than” undo Adam’s act of disobedience (5:19).¹³⁵ We take Jesus’ act of obedience here to be his willingness to go to death. Paul uses the word obedience here as synonymous with the “righteous act” which is directed to all for the righteousness of life (5:20).

In sum, the one sphere is characterized by sin, death, unrighteousness, disobedience, and condemnation, while the other is one of grace, gift, life, obedience and righteousness. Grieb uses the language of family for these two locations. The Adam family is bound to sin and death, while the Abrahamic and Christ family is bound to Spirit and to freedom.¹³⁶ The primary emphasis here is not on the negativity of the Adamic family (e.g. sin, death, condemnation) but rather on the benefits of the new family in Christ. Here we have Paul going over the top to emphasize the reality that the obedience of Christ has “more than”¹³⁷ outdone the Sin that Adam represents:

133. Toews, *Romans*, 173. For Toews Adam is not so much the one who individually responsible for bringing Sin in to the world, as one who “represents” Sin, nor is the one man who characterizes a span of time when Sin as a power reigned. These verses are not here to make a case for “original sin” so that blame is placed on Adam as the cause of sin but to show the contrast between the Adam sphere where Sin reigns and the Christ sphere, where grace reigns.

134. On Sin as a power or sphere see Toews, *Romans*, 161, 409–16; Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 66–69; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 291.

135. Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 65.

136. Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 60

137. Toews, *Romans*, 170. On the “more than” aspect of Christ (Christ) over Adam (Sin), Toews notes that “where there is an abundance of Sin there is a superabundance of Grace.”

But not as the trespass, so also the effect of grace, for if by the trespass of the one, the many died, how much more the gift of God and the gift in grace, which is of the one man Jesus Christ, has overflowed to the many ... For if by the trespass of the one, death reigned through the one, how much more those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness shall reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ ... The law came in to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace overflowed in abundance, in order that sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (5:15,17,19, 20-21).

Note the extensive use of grace here. As in 5:5 the grace of God is seen here as the “love of God poured out” in the sphere of Christ. The case is clear. The reign of Christ is one which is infused at its outset and in its ongoing life as one of grace. Death reigned, but now not only does grace reign, those who receive grace reign in life. They are, as Toews notes, “grace kings.”¹³⁸

Romans 6:1-14:Immigration by Baptism

In 6:1-14 Paul describes the “in Christ” sphere firstly with the metaphor of baptism. First though, he must deal with a misunderstanding that may arise because of his lavish discussion of God’s grace in 5:15-21. He has noted that the very place where sin increased, grace increased as well. It begs the question, “Should we continue to sin, that grace may abound?” (6:1). The “no” answer to this question includes an excursus on the death to sin and new life in Christ which has been granted through baptism. How can believers live in the sphere of sin when, just as Christ, they have died to it? (6:2)

Paul’s argument again pits two spheres against each other. On the one side is sin (6:1,2,6,7,10,11) and the old humanity (6:6) which includes the reality of being under the law (6:14). Important to note here is the locative nature of sin. Paul speaks of being “in” sin (6:2). On the other side is the glory of the Father (6:4), walking in newness of life (6:4),¹³⁹ living with Christ and knowing Christ (6:8,9), living to God in Christ (6:11), and the freedom to use

138. Toews, *Romans*, 160. For those low in society, such as slaves, to placed in such a grace-filled place connected with Royalty.

139. Grieb notes that the term “walking” as in “walking in newness of life” has ethical implications. The believer is now walking with a new Lord, or, as Grieb says, “a new family head.” Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 67.

members as tools of righteousness for God. This latter sphere is one of living under grace and not under law (6:14).

How shall we picture believers being released from the sphere of sin to the sphere of grace where there is newness of life? Paul's metaphor here is that of baptism tied together with the death and resurrection of Christ. It is in baptism that the Christian has been transferred to the other sphere.¹⁴⁰ The believer has died with Christ and is now risen to new life in his resurrection. Sin, with the old humanity, died with Christ in his death and now does not hold sway for those who walk in newness of life in part because of the close proximity of Christ to the believer in baptism. Here Paul uses συν (translated in English by "with" or "co-") repeatedly on its own or as a prefix to show the intimate way in which the baptized believer goes through Christ's death with the believer. Paul says that "we were buried (συνετάθημεν) with him in baptism." (6:4). He argues shortly after, "For if we have grown together σύνφυτοι) in the likeness of his death ..." (6:5). In 6:6: "Our old humanity was crucified with (συνεσταυρώθη) him so that the body of sin might be destroyed." In 6:8 we have the use of συν twice: "But if we died with (σὸν) Christ we believe also that we will live with him (συζήσομεν). The repeated use of συν together with the metaphors of baptism and the death and resurrection of Christ contribute to a picture of the believer clinging to Christ in his death and resurrection.¹⁴¹ The Christian shares the narrative of the cross and resurrection of Christ with him in baptism. By being joined with Christ in this intimate journey in baptism the believer has moved out of the "territory of sin" and into the "territory of grace."¹⁴²

So what about sin now? Paul contends that the freshly baptized believer is now joined to Christ and thereby dead to sin and walking in newness of life. The believer is in a new

140. Toews, *Romans*, 173. Toews notes that baptism was a common practice in the ancient world to signify the transfer of a person from one religious community to another.

141. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 313. The συν- compound is a characteristic of Paul's style and theology. Dunn takes the συν- compounds in this text not only as an intimate joining with Christ for the individual Christian but also her joining with the entire Christian community and with creation (Rom 8:22).

142. Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 67.

territory. Death is no more a “lord” (6:9) in this sphere for there is a new lord to whom the believer is now intimately joined. The death to sin is once and for all (6:10). Sin’s power is broken, and the believer is “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11).

Now that sin is placed firmly in the other sphere, Paul still offers an imperative to those in Christ. The power of sin and death is over for believers, but sin itself is still alluring. Like the Israelites in the desert, allure to the land of slavery is close at hand. But now that they know that they have been joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, and live in newness of life, Paul exhorts, “do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, to obey their passions” (6:12). The picture in 6:12-13 is that of a subject sitting or kneeling before a sovereign or benefactor. Those in Christ virtually kneeling before their Lord would not allow their members to serve the lord of the other kingdom, but would obviously “present their members as tools of righteousness to God” (6:13).¹⁴³ As if Paul has not said it yet, he says it once again: “For sin will not lord it over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (6:14). In sum, those in Christ, having gone through so much with Christ (dying and rising), and having been given so much by him (release from the sphere of sin, and new life), in this intimate occasion of baptism, they are now in a sphere where they are with him and are able to present themselves to him. Paul will develop what “presentation” means in the next section.

Romans 6:15-23: A Place for Freedom and Worship

Paul has placed himself in an odd position now, especially with 6:14. Effectively, he has placed law in the sphere which includes sin, death, and condemnation.¹⁴⁴ The believer is not “under law” now but “under grace.” The result of Christ’s obedience aside from the law now presents a problem. This is scandalous, for the law has previously been understood to be

143. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 345

144. Many note that Paul is not equating law with sin but rather noting that the law intensified sin but at the same time could not solve the problem of sin. The law makes sin intense and overwhelming which then has dominion over believers. Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 68.

in the realm of life, good news, and salvation.¹⁴⁵ With no law as such to guide the believer's life, the question may be asked, as he does in Romans 6:15, "may we sin, because we are not under the law but under grace?" Again, the answer is in the negative. But here Paul uses the image of the obedient slave to make his point.

He has hinted at this answer already with his image of presentation in 6:13. More important here, Paul sees himself as a slave of Christ, as he proclaims in his opening words to the Roman Christians (1:1).¹⁴⁶ The image of the slave and the master is again placed in the context of the two spheres. For Paul, a kingdom or a given reign or sphere always has a master and obedient subjects.¹⁴⁷ Having shown that the believers are in the reign of grace, he must now claim what obedience looks like in this realm.

For Paul there are only two options. There are slaves to sin and death in the one realm, and slaves to righteousness in the realm of grace. Those who are in the realm of sin "present" themselves in obedience to death, while those in the realm of grace "present" themselves as slaves to righteousness (6:16). For the believer, there should be praise directed to God because they are no longer enslaved to sin but enslaved to righteousness (6:18). The believer obeys "from the heart to the form of teaching" with which they were entrusted (6:17). Paul here has the believers recalling the time when they were presenting their bodies to impurity and lawlessness (6:19). He asks what the fruit of that enslavement was and states that the result of that enslavement was shame and death (6:20-21). But now, he claims, by presenting themselves to righteousness there is a resultant holiness or sanctification (*αγιασμον*, 6:19,22)

145. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 326.

146. Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. Sharon H. Ringe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 94-95. Tamez points out that the metaphor of slavery is carefully chosen by Paul. He not only considers himself a slave but is writing to a church where there are likely many slaves, former slaves, and free citizens. The differences between slave and free may be why Paul has to note in 12:1-13 that the church is a community of equals.

147. Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 67. "Once more Paul is thinking territorially, only now the body of the Christian is the disputed territory that will be occupied by one power or another, but not both." See also Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 345: "If not enslaved to God, then enslaved to sin; either in Adam or in Christ ... The only real freedom for man is as a slave to God, and life lived in recognition of his creaturely dependence."

and life eternal (6:22). They have been freed from that enslavement by God and are now enslaved to God (6:22). In sum, the old sphere of sin resulted in death, “but the free gift (χαρισμα) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (6:23). At the end of chapter 6 Paul returns to the grace which pervades this sphere.

Sum: The Sphere of Grace and Obedience

What is Paul’s logic as he connects God’s grace and Christian behaviour? Paul argues in Romans 5-6 with a spatial understanding of faith in Christ. To be in Christ is to have the benefits of freedom and be released from the power (or realm) of sin, shame, death and wrath. To be in Christ is to be raised with Christ and to walk in newness of life. Paul communicates the reality of being in Christ with several spatial metaphors. The most obvious one is that of being “in Christ” which is reiterated throughout this section. To explain what it means to be in Christ he uses the language of location in relation to Christ, the Spirit, God, and grace. The believer has access to and stands in grace. The believer is under grace and has had love poured on her from above. The believer has been with Christ in his death and resurrection, and now walks with him in newness of life. Throughout this section Paul notes the contrasts between the two realms. He is clear that we can only dwell in one, but does admit that the realm of Adam continues to tempt the Christian. Nonetheless the Christian is now located within the reign of Christ which is a place of reconciliation, peace, life, and conformity to Christ.

The new reign is not a static but dynamic place, nor is this God’s final place for the believer. According to Wright’s reading of this passage as noted above, by only going to the end of chapter 6 we have left the Hebrews (and the new believers) living in the wilderness with the promise of God for something better. While they are in the Christ sphere it is a place of ongoing struggle with suffering as well as with behavioural dilemmas. But in this place it makes sense that the believer would present his members to the lord of this sphere, and not the other sphere. Why would the believer not serve the master who has released him from

captivity in sin (or Egypt)? In this sphere the Christian is free, but not free to obey the lusts which hold sway in the other sphere. This is a different place! The freedom here is *from sin* and *for life*. Here the pattern of obedience is set by Christ who was able to be obedient in a way that neither Adam nor the law could do. Here obedience is from the heart which has had “love poured into it.” Here the believer is surrounded on all sides by an ongoing infusion of grace which results in hope, holiness and, in time, eternal life.

Conclusions

Seen in this spatial way it is not surprising to see “faith” and “obedience” as closely related to each other in Paul’s letter to the Romans and especially in chapters 5-6. The term “obedience of faith” frames the book of Romans appearing at the very beginning (1:5) and the end (15:8) both in relation to Gentiles. Paul is looking for obedience (literally “to hear under” or “to respond properly to hearing”)¹⁴⁸ or faithfulness to God among the Gentiles, as well as Jews.

For Paul, God alone justifies or makes right the relationship between God and humanity – for all have sinned and fallen short (3:21-24). It is entirely by God’s righteousness manifest in Jesus that Jews and Gentiles (3:22-24) alike have been reconciled to God. This indicative serves as the ground for all else. At the same time though, if we take the covenant narrative into view, God’s making-right with humanity is always relational. While the relationship is clearly not one of equals, it is clear that faith/faithfulness is to be characteristic of both parties. Paul has communicated that God is faithful to the covenant promise and can be trusted “through Jesus Christ.” The gift is free (5:16) for Jew and Gentile alike. But as in any relationship there are expectations and boundaries. In this sphere the believers’ behaviours (the way they “present” themselves) will be different now for they have a new family head,

148. Toews, *Romans*, 398–99.

namely, Christ. (6:19-21). Paul here does not lay down what those behaviours are, but will give some examples in chapters 12-15. Nonetheless the pattern is there in Christ's obedience.

Within the sphere of Christ the believer is not left to their own devices to be a slave. The believers are now obeying "from the heart" (6.17) and are, by being in Christ, also in the Spirit (8:9) They have been transferred, indeed redeemed, from the reign of death to one of life. Their spirituality is one of life and hope and even royalty (5:2), and not one of shame and sin. The access into this sphere calls for thanksgiving, worship, and hope. In short, it calls for a new presentation of the believer. A presentation that unites worship, behaviour, and a hopeful spirituality. The identity of the one who was obedient and who "more than" outdid the power of sin is the paradigm which the citizens are drawn to by the Spirit. It is not an identical correspondence, as Hays and Gorman rightly note. But the head of the sphere in his obedience to God is the Saviour and the one who has demonstrated what presenting one's life to God looks like.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN HOWARD YODER'S THEOLOGY OF GRACE

In the interest of moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon I looked to some Pauline scholarship related to grace and ethics as well as chapters 5 and 6 of Paul's letter to the Romans. Whether one takes an indicative/imperative, narrative, or spirituality approach to Paul's letters, the priority of God's grace is clear. "Being precedes act," in every case. God's grace precedes any response from humans. It is only in the context or sphere of God's grace that there is a context to speak of Christian behaviour or ethics. Paul proclaims and teaches about God's grace, tells larger narratives, and embodies obedience to Christ in the context of this new "in Christ" sphere.

Introduction

Mid to late twentieth century North American Mennonite theology would be initiated and then defined in large part by Harold Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision* which retrieved community, discipleship and loving nonresistance as the core of historic Anabaptism and the way forward for North American Mennonites.¹⁴⁹ The next generation of Mennonite scholars, including John Howard Yoder and his Concern compatriots,¹⁵⁰ while critiquing and modifying Bender's three-

149. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*.

150. The Concern group was made up of primarily North American graduate students who under the inspiration of Bender and his generation were studying the Radical Reformation. They met together first in 1952 in Amsterdam to share their concerns with regard to the state of the Mennonite Church in North American in connection with what they were discovering of the Radical Reformation. They would go on to publish a set of pamphlets, called *Concern: A Pamphlet Series for Questions of Christian Renewal* from 1954 to 1971. The Concern group's gatherings, and its pamphlets were the primary place for Yoder and others, fresh from uncovering Anabaptist era writings, to share their findings and thinking with Mennonites and more broadly in ecumenical settings. See Mark Thiessen Nation's *Mark Thiessen Nation, John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 42–53.

fold formulation, would continue to think and write out of an understanding that echoed Bender's central vision: The Mennonite church, if it was to remain faithful to its Anabaptist roots, would have to be rebuilt in part on those themes which made Mennonites distinct from other Christian denominations: namely, discipleship, community and pacifism.¹⁵¹ Yoder, the most prolific and noteworthy of this second generation of Anabaptist retrieval is here asked the question, where is God's divine grace when the thrust of twentieth century Mennonite theology and ethics appears to be located in the sphere of human agency - namely discipleship, community and pacifism?

Yoder is not just *a* test case for the question of grace in twentieth century Mennonite theology but on the surface he looks like a *tough* test case. Yoder has been one of the most strident and persistent twentieth century North American apologists for Christian pacifism and Christian social ethics. Does not Yoder's case for the social-political-ethical life of Jesus as normative for Christian behaviour, his argument for "obedience" to God, his constant "looping back" to the ethical life of Jesus, and his persistent "looping around" to the ethical life of the believer make human agency preeminent to the detriment of God's unmerited grace? We take the question of divine grace to Yoder precisely because of his well developed and documented theological ethics. It is here in a strong voice for Christian ethics from a Mennonite theologian that we might see just one window into how twentieth century Mennonite theology has woven together God's grace and Christian ethics.

The body of this study will focus on the presence and character of God's grace in a selection of Yoder's writings under the topics of justification, eschatology and ecclesiology. It will not be enough to simply track where Yoder uses the term "grace" or "gospel" or any other word that denotes God's saving mercy. We are searching rather for windows into Yoder's structural understanding of God's grace as he describes and develops his theological ethics.

151. Karl Koop, "Requisite Conditions for Identity and Vision," in *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium: A Search for Identity*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000), 19.

Background Issues

Before looking for how Yoder views grace, and how grace functions in his writings on justification, ecclesiology, and eschatology, there are background issues which must be treated. First, we will look to Gilbert Meilaender and his simple framework for understanding some of the inherent issues which are endemic to a theological analysis of grace and ethics in the current era. Next, I will briefly place this study in the context of current Anabaptist-Mennonite discussions of grace and ethics. Lastly, I offer a brief biography of John H. Yoder and his work, noting some of the issues and complications that will be present in engaging him on the issue of grace. We will then summarize some of the main assumptions made in Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* as a way of introducing his main contribution to theological ethics.

A Theological Framework for God's Grace and Christian Ethics

Any study of grace and ethics has its hazards. We are embarking here on an issue contested for centuries – a contest heated up in the Reformation period. As a way of beginning the discussion in a theological way, I have chosen Gilbert Meilaender's framework of grace as favour and gift in his essay entitled "Divine Grace and Ethics" in the *Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*. As a theological starting point, I believe Meilaender's simple way of describing grace as favour and gift is a helpful way to sort out not only Yoder's view of grace, but Oswald Bayer's view as well.

Meilaender notes that one of the many contested issues throughout Christian history in the discussion of ethics and grace includes the contested issue of whether grace is gift or favour:

Is grace fundamentally a gift bestowed by God and the Christian's grace-given faith, then, formed by love? Or is grace fundamentally God's favour toward sinners, and then the Christian's response one of faith that trusts this promised favour? The first approach risks us turning inward – to how we are doing or what moral progress we are making – and such an inward turn is, of course, precisely a turn away from the power of grace that comes from the outside of us. The second approach risks depicting the Christian life as resting content in our sinful condition as if it were acceptable to a gracious God.

Meilaender contends that the New Testament account can confirm grace as both gift and favour.

Paul repeatedly speaks of the unmerited favour of God to sinners yet also speaks of “grace as a gift bestowed on and infused into believers.” Meilaender backs up this line with 1 Corinthians 1:4: “I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace (*charis*) of God which has been given to you in Christ Jesus ... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift (*charism*).”¹⁵²

For Meilaender, favour is that side of grace that denotes God’s unmerited grace which is granted for the forgiveness of human sin. Borrowing from Reinhold Niebuhr, Meilaender sometimes uses the word pardon as a synonym for favour.¹⁵³ Favour can also stand for God’s providential grace as it places the human in a place of total faith and trust in God’s promises. Grace as gift for Meilaender is closely related to the Holy Spirit which enlivens and empowers “and makes a difference – a moral difference, in our lives and loves.”¹⁵⁴ Again borrowing from Niebuhr, Meilaender uses the word “power” sometimes instead of gift. Here grace is “empowerment” for life.

In this chapter we will note that the Mennonite John Howard Yoder emphasizes the gift or empowerment of grace over God’s favour: he is a theological ethicist who is looking at the moral life of the Christian. In the next chapter when we turn to the Lutheran Oswald Bayer we will note an emphasis on grace as favour or mercy. Bayer is concerned with the God who addresses and offers lavish pardon to humanity. Yet as we shall see for both Yoder and Bayer, the story is more dynamic and even mysterious. Yoder does connect his ethics to God’s favour, and Bayer, as we shall see in the next chapter, cares deeply about the ongoing moral life of the Christian. Nonetheless, I contend that Yoder’s emphasis on grace as empowerment needs corrective from the side of grace as favour.

The Topic of Grace in Current Mennonite Theology

I join with others in the Mennonite fold in North America over the last twenty years who

152. Gilbert Meilaender, “Divine Grace and Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80.

153. Meilaender, “Divine Grace and Ethics,” 83.

154. Meilaender, “Divine Grace and Ethics,” 79.

are concerned that Mennonite theology has emphasized grace as gift or empowerment to the detriment of grace as favour or pardon. A. James Reimer, Karl Koop, C. Arnold Snyder and Steve Dintaman – to name only a few from the Mennonite fold – are concerned with grounding Anabaptist-Mennonite ethical reflection in God’s pardoning grace. Dintaman names the issue correctly when he notes that Mennonite theology as it has been developed in the mid to late twentieth century has been reduced at times to political or social activism and thus burned the bridge to the theology – indeed burned the bridge to God, who must be placed prior to any questions of discipleship or ecclesiology.¹⁵⁵ Snyder, an Anabaptist-Mennonite historian, has noted the importance of the ethical life which Anabaptists championed but adds that “the early Anabaptists understood what Mennonites have forgotten: Discipleship is only a second, derivative step, not the primary or only step.” He also notes that discipleship is not an act of the will but “is a visible part of a spiritual condition, the result of God’s grace.”¹⁵⁶ Koop contends alarmingly that Mennonites “are increasingly in danger of living in the absence of God.” Like Reimer, Koop calls for more reflection and confession on the “Trinitarian God” who “exists beyond ourselves.”¹⁵⁷ In Meilaender’s words, Mennonites, with their overemphasis on grace as gift or empowerment “have turned inward” and away from “the power of grace that comes from outside.”

While the scholars noted above would agree to a large extent with Yoder that Jesus’s life and call to discipleship are central to faith, they are seeking to ground theology, worship, and ethics in God’s grace as both gift *and* favour.

Yoder: Mennonite and Ecumenist

Yoder grew up in an Amish Mennonite family and was a member in Mennonite Churches

155. Steven Dintaman, “On Flushing the Confession Rabbit Out of the Socio-Ecclesial Brushpile,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 34–35.

156. C. Arnold Snyder, “Spiritual Empowerment Toward Discipleship,” in *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium: A Search for Identity*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000), 30.

157. Koop, “Requisite Conditions for Identity and Vision,” 20.

throughout his life. Yoder served in the Mennonite community as president and professor at Goshen Biblical Seminary as well as administrator and missionary with the Mennonite Board of Missions. Yoder completed his doctoral degree at the University of Basel in church history under Ernst Staehelin. At Basel he also studied dogmatics with Karl Barth, New Testament with Oscar Cullman, and Old Testament with Walter Eichrodt, along with many courses in theological ethics and philosophy.¹⁵⁸ In addition to his ecumenically based education, Yoder considered his vocation, in part, to be an ecumenist. Yoder presented more than one hundred academic papers at ecumenical settings and served in leadership roles in various ecumenical, and academic settings. Yoder was part-time teacher, and then eventually a full-time professor at Notre Dame University from 1977 until his death in 1997.¹⁵⁹

The Politics of Jesus, first published in 1972, established Yoder as a “Mennonite voice” in ecumenical and evangelical circles. While many heard a *Mennonite* voice, Yoder liked to remind readers that this popular book, *The Politics of Jesus*, drew on few Anabaptist-Mennonite sources: the bulk of the sources were European Reformed scholars.¹⁶⁰ Yoder’s hope was that this work would be something that Mennonites could call their own but would also appeal to evangelicals and Protestants and Catholics.¹⁶¹

Searching for Grace in Yoder

One of the issues that complicates this study is that Yoder was not a systematic theologian. He eschewed the idea of theology as a system, preferring a churchly based program: speak to the questions asked and the issues raised by the church. A large body of Yoder’s articles,

158. For a brief biography of John Howard Yoder see Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 1–29. Yoder’s dissertation and a subsequent volume were translated in English only recently: John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptist and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers*, ed. and trans. C. Arnold Snyder and David Carl Stassen (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004). For the present debate on Yoder as an historian see C. Arnold Snyder, “Doing History with Theological Ethics in Mind,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 3–32.

159. Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 23–25

160. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 93.

161. Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 110–11.

many of which remain unpublished or scattered in churchly and academic publications, were written first as public addresses that served as responses to particular questions in public forums at seminaries, churches, church conferences and ecumenical gatherings.¹⁶² With the exception of his best known work *The Politics of Jesus*, and a number of smaller popular works on pacifism and Christian community like *Nevertheless*¹⁶³ and *Body Politics*,¹⁶⁴ Yoder primarily wrote article length works. Thankfully a number of key addresses/essays have found their way into accessible essay collections such as *The Royal Priesthood*,¹⁶⁵ *For the Nations*,¹⁶⁶ and *To Hear the Word*.¹⁶⁷ *Preface to Theology*¹⁶⁸ is a collection of lecture notes for a course by that name taught by Yoder at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

That Yoder did not grant us a tight monograph on God's grace – perhaps because he was never asked to – means that we need to search for God's grace and its connections throughout his many writings and under related themes. Craig A. Carter, in a humorous attempt to console the student who is looking for specific theological topics in Yoder, and also to defend Yoder for “not saying everything,” turns to practical issues which limited the scope of Yoder's work. Yoder was simply not asked by evangelicals to preach evangelistic sermons or participate in “deeper life days.” Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics alike invited Yoder to articulate a “biblically based social ethic,” or to speak on how the church might have a “viable peace witness in the modern world.”¹⁶⁹ What Carter maintains though is that just because Yoder did not address

162. Mark Thiessen Nation, comp., *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997).

163. John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: A Meditation on the Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1971).

164. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1992).

165. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 102–26.

166. John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

167. John Howard Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

168. John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002).

169. Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001), 128–29.

certain issues of Christian orthodoxy in a direct and systematic way does not mean that these issues did not matter in his theological ethics. Grace, as we shall see, did matter. But one does have to look for it under the umbrella of the ethical or ecclesiological themes which dominate his writings. Nonetheless we will find many references to, and indeed essays and sections of essays where Yoder's understanding of God's agency and grace are noted, developed, and integrated into his theological ethics.

Ethical Assumptions in *The Politics of Jesus*

For Yoder, the study of theology – and certainly anything related to Christology – must include the *life* of Jesus. For Yoder, the “work” of Christ is not to be reduced to what happens in the cross and resurrection. The *life* of Jesus and his teachings matter for all theological and ethical reflection and must be integrated with Jesus' death and resurrection.

The main critique in *The Politics of Jesus* is that reflection on Christian ethics and theology has not focused in on the life of Jesus Christ as central to Christian faith and life. In the first chapter Yoder lists several ways in which the teachings of Jesus have been misunderstood and sidelined in Christian ethics: 1) The ethics that Jesus lived and taught were only for an “interim” because Jesus saw the world as he knew it passing away. 2) Jesus as a simple rural figure, thus his life and teachings do not apply to the complex urban institutional world. 3) As a peasant from up country Jesus has no control over the political powers, thus he has nothing to say to Christians who live and work in situations of complex political power. 4) Jesus' message was ahistorical, having to do with inward spirituality not with societal matters. 5) How Jesus lived and died is of little cause for reflection because Jesus came only to do the gracious work of justification and thus the behaviour of the Christian is not at issue.¹⁷⁰

In addition to the above reasons why Jesus' teachings and life have been sidelined for Christian ethics, Yoder singles out H. Richard Niebuhr for special consideration – and this

170. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 4–8.

critique lurks behind much of *The Politics of Jesus* and many of Yoder's other works. Yoder takes issue here with Niebuhr's understanding of the Trinity in relation to ethics. In Yoder's words, Niebuhr claims:

One should not make Jesus too important for ethics ... since God the Father would call for a different (perhaps more institutionally conservative) social ethic, based on an understanding of creation or providence whose content is derived otherwise than from Jesus. God the Spirit might guide us toward another, also a different ethic...¹⁷¹

Yoder disagrees with this splitting apart of the Trinity which can justify the kind of “responsibility ethics” that Niebuhr defends. For Yoder, if Jesus is the incarnation of God, and if Jesus Christ is – as the creeds say “fully human” and “fully divine” – would he not be the one to follow when pondering Christian ethics?¹⁷² In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder shows through sample “soundings” from the gospel of Luke, Pauline literature, Hebrews, and Revelation that Jesus was an ethical, social, and political figure whose life, teachings, death and resurrection had ethical, social, and political implications for discipleship. Yoder was not trying to build an “air tight” case but simply trying to show from a very “straightforward” reading¹⁷³ of several strands of the New Testament, buttressed by current discussions among New Testament scholars, that Jesus's life matters for theology and ethics.¹⁷⁴ Secondly, the point is made that those who have faith in Jesus (faith as “faithfulness” not only as “spiritual ascent”) imitate, follow, or participate in Christ's life through the Holy Spirit – even to the point of costly discipleship.¹⁷⁵ This study will assume Yoder's basic tenet that the life of Jesus matters, and that Jesus' words and actions

171. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 17.

172. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 102.

173. Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 47–70. Yoder's method of reading the Bible, not unlike his teacher Karl Barth, is referred to as “Biblical Realism.” While it includes historical-critical and literary work in its reading, it is more concerned with a “straightforward” or “plain” reading of the text for the life of the church. “Biblical Realism” assumes Christian belief and the authority of the text for the life of the church. This way of reading the Bible is open to the God who would shatter even the questions that we bring to the text. The Bible reads us as much as we read the Bible.

174. Yoder would state his modest proposal for *The Politics of Jesus* in the following way years later: “My conclusion was that an ordinary reading of the narrative and ethical texts of the New Testament does *not* sustain an *apolitical* reading either of Jesus or of the early Christian movement as a whole.” (his emphasis) See Yoder, *To Hear the Word*, 54

175. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 115–27.

had political, social and ethical implications for believers. The question for this chapter is not, is Yoder's picture of Jesus credible? Our question is rather, what does grace mean for Yoder as he engages in his theological ethics based on his formulation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?

Justification

A window into Yoder's view of divine grace in the context of justification is provided by his chapter entitled "Justification by Grace through Faith," in *The Politics of Jesus*. Here Yoder consistently critiques medieval and Reformation views of justification in that they disregard or marginalize both the life of Jesus and the life of the disciple. Yoder prefers the word "reconciliation" over "justification," in part as a way to stress the social side of God's saving work. But in stressing the social side, he can easily be misinterpreted as ignoring the personal.

Yoder begins his chapter by taking issue with God's grace as only a "declaration" of righteousness. By this he seems to refer to what Meilaender would call grace as favour. The strict forensic grace of Martin Luther, where the individual remains a sinner (*simil iustus et peccator*) while being declared righteous drives a wedge between faith and ethics, between the life of Jesus and his cross and resurrection, as well as between Jesus and Paul. Yoder does not deny that it is first and foremost God who saves and justifies, but is concerned about how Jesus as an ethical model or teacher for the Christian has been left out of "objective" views of God's grace. As Yoder states, in a strictly "declarative" view of God's grace, "The act of justification or the status of being just or righteous before God is therefore radically disconnected from any objective or empirical achievement of goodness by the believer."¹⁷⁶ Yoder asks, when justification is

176. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 213. In *Preface to Theology*, when discussing atonement, Yoder takes issue with the "objective" nature of the Anselmic theory in that salvation "can be accomplished on behalf of people who neither need to do anything to receive it nor even choose to accept it." This ignores much of the New Testament which focuses not on God's judgment and expiation as in a courtroom, but on God's call for covenant, or for "loving obedience in communion." Yoder is not opposed to an *ex operatum* view of God's work as such, but rather notes that the danger is that grace becomes cheap if it is not, as the early Anabaptists noted, "unrelated to the conditions stated by the Lord himself." See 302-303.

disconnected from the behaviour of the believer, what are we then to do with Paul's many exhortations to better behaviour? Are Paul's ethical teachings, the "vestiges of another system, destined to fade away?"¹⁷⁷ In other words, if declarative grace holds no implications for human transformation, as seems to be the case in "classic Protestantism,"¹⁷⁸ are the ethical issues which Paul notes in his letters to be understood as "interim" in the same way as Jesus' ethics are seen as "interim"?

Yoder finds support for his argument from the insights gained in the early and middle twentieth century of Pauline scholarship. Yoder notes here the excessively individualistic interpretation that has been given to Paul from Luther and the Western world generally. Yoder notes Krister Stendahl's work on Martin Luther's preoccupation with self-acceptance and guilt which Luther conveniently finds in Paul. Yoder follows Stendahl, noting that interpretations of justification in Paul have focused almost solely on the "question of personal guilt and righteousness."¹⁷⁹ Yoder wants to set aside, in the interests of looking afresh at justification, that "the righteousness of God and righteousness of humanity are most fundamentally located at the individual level." Yoder posits here a hypothesis that he will work through in his chapter:

For Paul righteousness, either in God or in human beings, might more appropriately be conceived of as having cosmic or social dimensions. Such larger social dimensions would not negate the personal character of the righteous God who imputes to those who believe; but by englobing the personal salvation in a fuller reality they would negate the individualism with which we understand reconciliation.¹⁸⁰

Yoder notes that Paul's mission and faith were not about his own individual angst but about proclaiming the message of God's reconciling work in Christ to the newly formed church of Jew and Gentile. Paul's faith and mission was not about his own inner struggles or his "existential anguish."¹⁸¹ Paul's new mission was focused on a community "in Christ" which would be made up of Jews and Greeks, slave and free:

177. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 213.

178. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 213.

179. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 214.

180. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 215.

181. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 217.

What was at stake in the proclamation of “the God of Jew and Gentile” was precisely that it was to be proclaimed to both and that both were to become parts of the new believing community, some having come by way of the law, and some not.¹⁸²

Thus Paul’s charge to the Jews with regard to the law did not have to do with personal sin but with the social reality of the Messianic community:

In sum: the fundamental issue was that of the social form of the church. Was it to be a new and inexplicable kind of community of both Jews and Gentiles, or was it going to be a confederation of a Jewish Christian sect and a Gentile one? Or would all of the Gentiles have first to become Jews according to the conditions of pre-messianic proselytism?”¹⁸³

Yoder uses other Pauline texts to show that Paul’s mission was focused not on individual salvation but on God’s reconciliation of humanity. Ephesians 2:11-26 is cited to show that, for Paul, Christ’s work of justification between Gentiles and Jews is seen as the reconciliatory outcome of the cross and resurrection:

The work of Christ is not only that he saves the soul of the individuals and henceforth they can love each other better; the work of Christ, the making of peace, the breaking down of the wall, is itself the constituting of a new community made up of two kinds of people, those who had lived under the law and those who had not. The events of the book of Acts narrate as the recent initiative of the Holy Spirit in opening up the churches, first in Jerusalem and then in Samaria, then in Damascus and Antioch, to the fellowship of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, are here interpreted by Paul as being the extended meaning of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁸⁴

Yoder also notes the work of Marcus Barth. Reflecting on Galatians, Barth notes the social and reconciliatory nature of justification in connection to the death and resurrection of Christ:

Sharing in the death and resurrection is the means of justification. Only in Christ’s death and resurrection is the new man created The new man is present in actuality where two previously alien and hostile men come together before God. Justification in Christ is thus not an individual miracle happening to this person or that person, which each may seek or process for himself. Rather justification by grace is a joining together of this person and that person of the near and far; ... it is a social event.”¹⁸⁵

182. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 217.

183. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 216.

184. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 219.

185. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 220–21. Yoder is citing Marcus Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5/2 (Spring 1968), 241 ff.

For Yoder, as for Marcus Barth, there is no need to speak of the sequence from justification to sanctification: “It is not that “faith” occurs first as an inner existential leap of the individual past concern for his or her finitude, and then God operates a change in the person who becomes able to love others.”¹⁸⁶ Here Yoder collapses justification and sanctification into one word or perhaps under one umbrella – that of reconciliation.

Yoder finds further support for this social, reconciliatory view of justification when he looks to the root meaning of justification. Justification means “setting things right.” It is a “verbal noun” rather than an “abstract noun defining a person’s quasi-legal status as a result of a judge’s decree.” He notes further: “To proclaim divine righteousness means to proclaim that God sets things right; it is a characteristic of the God who makes a covenant with us to be a right-setting kind of God.”¹⁸⁷ This “right-setting” God grants a grace that both frees from sin and frees persons for community.

For Yoder, when Paul speaks of reconciliation he is proclaiming, some decades after Pentecost, that the reconciliation offered in Christ’s life, death and resurrection is a real experience of the church.¹⁸⁸

Paul says that it [the experience of reconciliation] characterizes the victory of God’s creation-sustaining love that insider and outsider, friend and enemy are equally blessed, in such manner that the genuineness (Jesus said, “perfection”) of our love is also made real at the point of its application to the enemy, the Gentile, the sinner.”¹⁸⁹

The reconciling work of Christ, which has produced the “new humanity,” means for Paul a certain kind of ethics in relation to marriage, work, slavery, and other issues,

but it is par excellence with reference to enmity between peoples, the extension of neighbor, love to the enemy, and the renunciation of violence even in the most righteous cause, that this promise takes on flesh in the most original, most authentic, the most frightening and scandalous, and therefore in the most evangelical way. It is the good news

186. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 221.

187. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 224.

188. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 225.

189. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 225.

that my enemy and I are united, through no merit or work of our own, in a new humanity that forbids henceforth my ever taking his or her life in my hands.¹⁹⁰

Here we see the connection for Yoder between God's reconciliation of humanity and the Christian witness to love of enemy. God's reconciliation – characterized in Christ by love for the enemy – is the good news that forms the church and empowers costly and evangelical mission.

In the final paragraph of "Justification by Grace through Faith," Yoder notes that he is aware that his argument is "one-sided" on the issue of the social aspects of justification. His case has been developed, he contends, in this way "in order to correct" a narrow view of justification and the forgotten role of Jesus Christ in theology and ethics. But he does not deny the other side:

My presentation, in order to correct for the one sided social ethic which has been dominant in the past, emphasizes what was denied before: Jesus as teacher and example, not only as sacrifice; God as the shaker of the foundations, not only as the guarantor of the orders of creation; faith as discipleship, not only as subjectivity. The element of debate in the presentation may make it seem that the "other" or "traditional" element in each case – Jesus as sacrifice, God as creator, faith as subjectivity – is being rejected. It should therefore be restated that ... no such injunction is intended.¹⁹¹

Yoder, Justification, and Grace in Anabaptist-Mennonite Context

Yoder unmoors justification from individualistic interpretations, noting that the grace which frees the individual from sin and from enmity between others creates a new humanity in the church. The wall between God and the individual, and the wall between individuals have fallen down because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. *How* this has been done in Jesus' life, death and resurrection will be seen more fully in the section below on eschatology. For now, we will look to some of the questions which come up in this section. Namely, what is the character of this grace that Yoder describes here and how is it integrated with his ethics? In order to do this we will place Yoder's views in the context of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the "new perspective" of Pauline studies. We will also ask some questions here about the unmooring of justification from forensic or declarative grace. By insisting that God's grace be

190. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 226.

191. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 226.

spoken of in the context of looping back to Jesus and looping around to the disciple, is Yoder placing too much emphasis on the social and moral aspects of Christianity and not enough on God's grace?

Yoder's views of justification as reconciliation for the individual and for the community is consistent with that of his Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. In Anabaptist-Mennonite theology the God who declares persons righteous – by no merit of their own – also grants power through the Spirit to live the new life.¹⁹² Grace is not only that which pardons, but also that which empowers. Generally, early Anabaptists affirmed Luther's tenet that salvation is by God's grace alone through no human merit. They also rejected that the law is a means to salvation. Frances F. Hiebert notes, however, that many of the Anabaptists saw forensic justification as inadequate. Justification was much more than a legal transaction. With God's pardoning grace came the Spirit "whereby people are able to appropriate Christ's saving work."¹⁹³ For the Anabaptists, Jesus was both redeemer and example – his work of justification granting both favour and gift. Thomas Finger notes that grace for the early Anabaptists had a "punctiliar"¹⁹⁴ quality but was also seen as an ongoing empowerment for following the example of Christ. "Faith," for the Anabaptists, was an "activity that intrinsically produced works" because faith unites the person to Christ, where through grace "ontological transformation" takes place.¹⁹⁵ Thus Yoder's notion that the "work" of Christ includes his life as well as death and resurrection; that saving grace is both an individual and social reality; and that grace is both redeeming and transformative (favour and gift), are in keeping with this brief outline of early Anabaptist thought. Still, because of his admittedly one sided emphasis, it would be easy to conclude that Yoder is only pushing the social-ethical side of faith.

192. Bender, "Walking in the Resurrection," 97.

193. Frances F. Hiebert, "The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology," *Direction* 30, no. 2 (2001): 128–29.

194. Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 112.

195. Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 131.

Yoder's reading of Paul on the topic of justification anticipated some aspects of the "new perspective" of Pauline thought which has mushroomed in the later part of the twentieth century. Douglas Harink notes that it is "remarkable" that many post-Protestant scholars have hardly recognized how Yoder "anticipated" the "new perspective."¹⁹⁶ One scholar who has recognized Yoder's contribution is Richard Hays. Reflecting on *The Politics of Jesus*, Hays notes that Yoder's "readings reflect an astute – indeed almost prescient – grasp of important developments in the field of New Testament studies." Hays notes further that "at numerous points," including Yoder's "interpretation of Galatians as an argument about the social form of the church (rather than about the problem of individual guilt) ... his presentation reflects careful harvesting of the best available insights of biblical scholarship in the early 1970's."¹⁹⁷ Further, as Harink points out, Yoder shares much with scholars such as James G. Dunn, J. Louis Martyn, N.T. Wright and others in the "new perspective" on the following issues: 1) The "*ecclesia* is intrinsic to the meaning of justification." 2) Faith and doing are not opposed in Paul. 3) Reconciliation is key to Pauline thought generally. 4) The gospel of Christ has power to transform the personal, the social and the political.¹⁹⁸ This is a mouthful but it captures the reading of Paul which Yoder anticipated in the early 1970's in this short chapter on justification in *The Politics of Jesus*. Yet, as discovered in the previous chapter, the New Paul is not so new anymore. Has the pendulum swung too far so that we have now left the individual behind in favour of the social, and left God's agency behind in favour of human agency?

Critical questions on the issue of personal faith in tension with community must be asked of Yoder. While he declares in "Saved by Grace through Faith" that he is not trying to diminish the personal dimension of salvation, he does seem to sideline God's gracious removal of sin and guilt from the discussion of justification. Here he seems to deny the *existential experience* of pardoning grace both on the individual and social level. I will set this particular issue aside for

196. Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals*, 60.

197. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 245.

198. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 60–61.

now and will discuss it below once we have explored Yoder's eschatology. I will also treat this issue in the following chapter. Oswald Bayer would suggest that Yoder has not fully understood Luther on the issue of the individual and social aspects of salvation.

I will note here the issue of God's grace and human agency in relation to Yoder's view of justification. What does Yoder's reconciling grace look like in the context of human agency? By unmooring a classical Protestant reading of declarative forensic grace from Paul - insisting that declarative grace does not sufficiently link the believer to Jesus and his call for discipleship - is Yoder borrowing from classical liberal concerns and placing too much emphasis on human potential to the detriment of God's favouring grace? I respond here with one extended (and hard-to-find) quote where Yoder places his theology of grace in clear distinction from a liberal notion of human potential:

The traditional liberal thought in ethics did fail, in large part, to take sin seriously enough, and thus did tend to see the adequate ethical fulfillment of the requirements of love as a simple possibility. This sort of perfectionism contradicts both history and Christian doctrine. Biblical perfectionism affirms not a simple possibility of achieving love in history, but a crucial possibility of participating in the victory of Christ over the effects of sin in the world. Obedience for the sectarian thus involves the cross, and the presence of sin has been worked into ethics, without either undermining the integrity of ethics as part of a valid theology or cheapening the work of redemption. This perfectionism of the cross is therefore not optimistic about either the world's or the Christian's goodness; it dares simply share the Bible's own confidence that with God all things are possible. . . . As the cross becomes meaningful in the New Testament only in relation to the resurrection and to Pentecost, so in sectarian ethics is forgiving grace rightly understood only in the context of empowering grace. Interpreting justification by faith as a ratification for conscious compromise with the presence of sin is what Paul calls sinning "that grace may abound"; what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." The Biblical perfectionist refuses to flatten God's goodness into mere forgiving mercy. He experiences redemption as a brand-new dimension of possibility for discipleship given the new man through his participation in the body of the risen Lord, and knowing the reality of this new life he refuses to spiritualize or to eschatologize it out of the realm of his earthly living and doing. This also is the grace of God, that we may walk in newness of life.¹⁹⁹

199. John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Dissent," *Concern* 1 (June 1955): 58-61. Some of the language in this quote was misunderstood and removed from Yoder's writings. He dropped the term "sect" preferring "believer's church" or simply "body of Christ" because "sect" was and still is loaded with negative meanings in ecumenical and sociological circles. Yoder, defying other definitions, saw sects as neither quaint, irrelevant, nor avoiding the larger issues of the day by withdrawing from society. Also, the term "Biblical perfectionism" was dropped. He would later define his way of reading the scriptures as "Biblical realism," as noted above. Further, the term "perfectionism" does not denote a legalism but "genuineness."

Here Yoder distances himself from liberal Protestantism and its high view of human agency. Yoder takes human sin too seriously to be called a liberal. Yoder makes it clear that it is only through the life, cross, and resurrection of Christ – and with acknowledgement of sin and weakness – that humans can speak of discipleship, obedience, or ethics. Any confidence the Christian has is in God, not in human goodness. Yoder speaks as well of the need to see the forgiving grace of God (favour) in connection with the empowering grace (gift) of God which frees the Christian to walk in “newness of life.”

For Yoder, God’s grace (as favour and gift) is fundamental for Christian ethics. It is only because of God’s grace through the life, death and resurrection of Christ that the human is justified or reconciled. Only God in Christ can “set right” the relationship between God and the individual, and between individuals, in the context of the church. The fact that God’s “setting right” is a call for the Christian, in the power of the Spirit, to participate by living a life of love and reconciliation modelled after Jesus, does not diminish God’s pardoning grace but rather celebrates it. Yet, the reader of Yoder’s writings must search high and low in order to find such statements as the one above. The majority of Yoder’s work tends to critique or simply leave out issues of personal faith in an effort to stress the social-ethical side. In an effort to revise how Christian ethics was thought about in the post-World War II era (as individualistic and reduced to general notions of love),²⁰⁰ Yoder’s effort was needed. However, three or four decades after Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus*, what is longed for is a closer integration of the personal and the social in the context of God’s grace. As noted above, North American Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship for the last three decades has directly or indirectly been critiquing Yoder’s under emphasis of the personal and his assumption but not development of the God’s grace.

Ecclesiology

A tireless advocate of the “Free church” or “Believers church” tradition, Yoder did not

200. See 72 above.

assume that Christian ethics were for society at large, nor was he advocating a kind of sectarianism. To try to do ethics for all of humanity is too much. The church has to focus only on *Christian ethics*, although there may be some places where the church can effect larger patterns in the world. Reiterated throughout Yoder's work is that *Christian ethics is for Christians because they have the resources to follow Christ*. These resources are given in the context of the church. I will treat this sentence in two stages.

Christian Ethics is only for Christians

For Christians, morality cannot be spoken of in universal terms. There is a thick line between Christian ethics, and ethics for those who are not Christian. This means that Christians do not simply adopt morality that seem to be “common sense” from the world. It also means that what holds for *Christian ethics* ought not be assumed for all people. The latter in fact cheapens the message of the distinctiveness and particularity of the gospel and almost always results in a “lowering of the bar” in the interests of inclusion. An example Yoder cites is Medieval Christian morality. Living within the bounds of the Constantinianism – where the dividing line between the church and the world had all but collapsed – two distinctive types of Christian ethics emerged: one for those few with a true “gospel call” or “vocation,” and another for the majority where a “moderate level of devotion was acceptable.” In this way Christian ethics as following, for instance, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was down-played so as to accommodate the masses. The monks could live a life modelled on Jesus words and actions, but those living in the world simply cannot and are therefore granted a more relaxed moral code. For Yoder the dividing line is not between two types of Christians but between those who confess Christ as Lord and those who do not.²⁰¹

201. John Howard Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics Versus the Wider Wisdom,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, comp. and ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 117. Yoder is ardently anti-Constantinian. This view is noted in virtually all of his writings. Here I let Yoder define his stance: “The central nature of this change, which Constantine himself did not invent or force upon the church is not a matter of doctrine or polity; it is the identification of the church and the world in the mutual approval and support exchanged by Constantine and the

That Christian ethics is for Christians does not diminish witness to society, the state, or the unbelieving neighbour. Christians do not turn away from society and its chaos into sectarian withdrawal. What is meant here is that the church's first call is to the particular and scandalous message that Jesus is Lord. While election by God through the story of Abraham and Jesus is scandalous to the world which has "a drive to disavow particularity," it is the truth that the Christian believes and celebrates.²⁰² Also, Christian ethics is for Christians because Christians have been graced with resources to live out Christian ethics.

Christian Resources for Ethical Living

Yoder lists Christian resources in an essay entitled "The Radical Revolution in Theological Perspective." The resources of the church listed here are "the assurance of forgiveness, the counseling and effective fellowship of the Christian brotherhood, the presence of the Holy Spirit as source of insight and motivation, [and] a changed attitude of the regenerate will."²⁰³ Here Yoder clearly spells out that pardoning grace as favour and gift are given to the church, but the emphasis is on the ongoing gifts of the Spirit within the church. That the Holy Spirit motivates and regenerates the will is essential for following Christ.

In "The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm" Yoder notes five Christian practices rooted in the New Testament which were "practiced in the early church as a social process

bishops. The church is no longer the obedient suffering line of true prophets; she has a vested interest in the present order of things and uses the cultic at their disposal to legitimize that order. She does not preach ethics, judgment, repentance, separation from the world; she dispenses sacraments and holds society together. Christian ethics no longer means the study of what God wants of man; since all of society is Christian (by definition, i.e. by baptism), Christian ethics must be workable for all of society." See John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1977), 65–66. There is much debate about Yoder's anti-Constantinianism. Reimer debates it at many points in his *Mennonites and Classical Theology*. Many of the essays in Ben C. Ollenberger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking* (Telford, Pennsylvania: Cascadia, 2004) also treat this issue. One of the reasons why this issue is debated among Anabaptist-Mennonites is because Mennonite theology in the mid twentieth century - including Yoder - sidelined or ignored much of the richness of Christian history (including the entire sacramental tradition - and thereby ways to speak about God's grace as favour) by labelling it "Constantinian."

202. Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," 111, 113.

203. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 112.

pattern” and which were “enabled and mandated as a part of the good news of redemption.”²⁰⁴ The five practices – which Yoder calls “sacraments” because “God is active in and through” them²⁰⁵ are: fraternal admonition (Matthew 18:15); the Lord’s supper; baptism; the giftedness (charism) of all believers (Ephesians 4:11-14); and the “Rule of Paul,” (1 Corinthians 12) where a meeting is held “in the power of the Spirit.”²⁰⁶

In these Christian practices God’s grace as both favour and gift are experienced. In baptism for instance, the believer is not only united to Christ but to others in the body. Recall that to be justified is also to be reconciled to God and to others. God’s reconciliation is experienced when, in fraternal admonition, an erring believer has been restored to the community through forgiveness. In these practices Christians also celebrate the new Kingdom which God is bringing. The supper for instance celebrates not only the presence of Christ in community but also the table of reconciliation which is yet to come.

In these five practices the pardoning grace of God as well as the empowering grace of God are experienced in and through the Holy Spirit. The favour and gift of God’s grace are not only celebrated in the church but also experienced – albeit imperfectly – through brothers and sisters in the church. For Yoder the church which celebrates God’s pardoning and empowering grace is the only possible context where one can speak specifically of Christian ethics.

It needs to be added here that these five practices taken together are also Yoder’s paradigm for mission. While it is true that Christians ethics is for Christians, the church is mandated to call others to conversion,²⁰⁷ and to witness to God’s love in nonviolent ways to the world. While all of the five practices are unique to the Christian church, they are translatable and will meet with approximations in the world. For instance, in a world of racism and conflict at

204. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 46

205. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 6.

206. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 43–46. These five practices are developed as well in Yoder, *Body Politics* and in John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” *Theology Today* 48, no. 1 (1991): 33–44.

207. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, 158.

many levels, unbelievers will be attracted to a community of people who actively practice reconciliation with each other. Not only will unbelievers be attracted to this community and seek conversion, there will also be times when practices seen in the church can be used in non-church settings. For instance believers can share the mediation and conflict resolution skills which have been practiced in the church with social and government organizations.²⁰⁸

The church's aim in her worship and her practices is not to christianize the social order but rather to witness to a reconciling God. The church, simply by being a reconciled community in Christ, bears powerful witness to the world.²⁰⁹ The church is a place where Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, Hispanic and African-American, can worship and live together. This church may be seen as a weak minority in the world, but this is as it should be. Like its crucified Saviour, wherein the church finds its life, the church is a forgiving servant characterized by loving reconciliation.²¹⁰

Yoder, the Church, and Ethics

Yoder's central notion that Christian ethics is for Christians is in keeping with his Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage and the "Believers Church" tradition. The Believers Church, or Free Church, which includes Anabaptist-Mennonites, Quakers, Baptists, and Pentecostals, places an emphasis on community relationships (including discipline), replaces "sacraments" with "ordinances" and places a clear distinction between the church and world. The line for Yoder and the free church tradition with regard to ethics is not drawn the way Luther drew it – between the private and civil duties of the Christian. Free church traditions see the line between believers and unbelievers as significant.²¹¹ In relation to ethics, there are simply some roles in society and

208. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 44. Yoder notes that various conflict mediation programs in the United States have been the fruit of Christian witness. He mentions specifically the Victim Offender Reconciliation program which brings offenders and victims together within the justice system with the hope not only of reconciliation between individuals but also of reforming the offender. See Yoder, *Body Politics*, 11–13.

209. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 113–15.

210. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 109–11.

211. Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford, Pennsylvania: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007), 115.

government that believers – because of their prior conviction to Christ as Lord – will refuse. Yoder's notion that Christian ethics is for Christians because Christians have resources that are different than unbelievers, is entirely in keeping with believers church ecclesiology. In this group that is not like the world, we have a different character and serve a different Lord who gifts the group with the Spirit.

Noted in both sections above is Yoder's overemphasis on the social to the detriment of the personal. While this critique still stands, I admit that in Yoder's ecclesiology, especially these five practices, we see glimpses into matters of personal-existential faith. The more novel practices that Yoder mentions, like fraternal admonition and the open meeting, would be intensely personal and existential experiences of faith. To be brought back into community after erring; to have one's *charism* noticed and welcomed in the church; to forgive and be forgiven in community are all intensely personal experiences of faith. But again, Yoder does not develop this personal side as such but rather sees the individual primarily in the context of the community.

A critique of Yoder's ecclesiology which needs to be noted here is the importance he places on the local church community and its decision and witness. And perhaps this critique applies to the Free Church generally. Here the lessons learned in the Church catholic are sidelined in favour of the local church community's understanding of Jesus and understanding of what the Spirit is doing in that given church. While the local community is crucial for Christian nurture and decision making, a given church itself may be so inward looking that it misses the grace that comes from the outside. One thing missed in the Free Church approach, as characterized by Yoder, is the rich historical sacramental tradition which celebrates God's grace as favour which comes clearly from *beyond* the community. While Yoder calls his practices sacraments, he does not develop these in concert with historical sacramental traditions. He does not do this, in part, because he sees sacramental traditions as downplaying Christian ethics. At

times, he notes as a passing comment, sacraments were reduced to mechanics or magic.²¹² This is a limited understanding of the sacramental tradition.²¹³ Mark Thiessen Nation, a close reader of Yoder, notes that he did not have a high view of the sacraments and “his views on the eucharist were not integral to any of his central positions.”²¹⁴ One of the positive moves of late twentieth century Mennonite theology has been a move toward reclaiming the sacramental tradition. This is a much needed corrective move toward God’s grace as favour.²¹⁵

Nonetheless Yoder has a place for God’s pardoning and empowering grace in his ecclesiology. The church is not another social institution but a body which has been created and empowered by God to witness to Christ in costly ways. While God’s reconciliation is the source and life of the church, and while the church will be a sign and witness to God’s wish for reconciliation in all of society, the church is not in sectarian withdrawal but involved in the world. Changing the world is God’s activity and not the church’s activity, although the church does witness in a particular way to that activity. The primary activities are not typical historical practices, marks of the church, or sacraments, but practices rooted in Yoder’s own reading of the New Testament that at best celebrate God’s grace as favour and especially empowerment for the work of reconciliation to a watching world. Another view though would be that these New Testament practices look more like good social process than they look like sacraments of the

212. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 94.

213. There are many who do not throw out the entire sacramental tradition in order to link church practices to ethics. Gordon W. Lathrop, a Lutheran, is but one example of a scholar who links ethical practice to the rich historical sacramental tradition. See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). We will see in the next chapter how Oswald Bayer intimately connects the preached word, the table, and baptism to the ethical life of the Christian.

214. Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 197.

215. Mennonite historians, liturgists and theologians are increasingly using sacramental language and concepts to describe Believers Church practices. See for instance John D. Rempel, “The Lord’s Supper in Mennonite Tradition,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 4–15. See also C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004). Snyder daringly uses the word sacrament to describe early Anabaptist practices. “Bridgefolk,” a group of Catholic and Mennonite scholars, pastors and lay persons, meets regularly to discuss their respective sacramental and peace theologies. See www.bridgefolk.net.

church which point to God and draw from God. By virtually ignoring historical sacraments for these practices, it may reduce the church to simple and loving relationships among people.

Eschatology

The phrase “Jesus is Lord” sums up Yoder’s eschatology. After a brief overview of what “Jesus is Lord” means for Yoder, we will note what this claim has to do with human agency in the context of God’s grace. Yoder does not see Christian effort as the effective means to bring about the Kingdom of God as this is God’s work of grace. Jesus’ lordship points not only to the place of Christ in history and the cosmos, but also to the Christian’s single-minded devotion to Christ in worship and obedience. One of the marks of God’s providential grace which will be found here is that the Christian is not “responsible” for the coming Kingdom, but is rather a witness to its reality in proclamation and action. That Christians are not responsible for moving the world from “here to there” or for “building the Kingdom” is, I contend, a word of God’s providential grace.

“Jesus is Lord” is not only a pietistic or existentialist statement of deference to Christ but one that also proclaims that Christ is at the right hand of God and is ruling history and the cosmos.²¹⁶ All that the Christian is and does is under the umbrella of God’s providence. As Yoder puts it,

The phrase “sitting at the right hand” and the title “Lord” are functionally equivalent of the classical scholastic doctrine of providence. They encode the conviction that the course of human events is being “provided” for by a wisdom and power beyond our ken.”²¹⁷

That history is being provided for puts the work of the Christian in context. All that has been mentioned above under the section on justification – such as following Jesus in his nonviolence and in reconciling love – only makes sense and takes shape in the context of the work and person of Christ who is now sitting at the right hand of God. Yoder notes that the solid basis of Christian

216. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 236.

217. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 246.

witness, such as evangelism, peace witness or otherwise, finds its source in the New Testament witness that Jesus is Lord:

The triumphant affirmation of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ by His cross, resurrection and ascension, and the pouring out of His Spirit, has triumphed over the powers. This is the concrete meaning of the term *Lord*.²¹⁸

The Powers and Principalities

Yoder's argument that Jesus is Lord is developed in connection with the "powers and principalities" language mostly found in the Pauline letters of the New Testament. That Jesus is Lord over all the powers by disarming them in his life, death, and resurrection is developed in several of Yoder's essays. In "Christ and Power" in *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder follows the work of Hendrikus Berkhof and Oscar Cullmann who refused to demythologize the language of the "powers and principalities" in the New Testament.²¹⁹ The Pauline language of thrones, principalities, powers, dominions, demons and angels is likened to the way moderns speak of the "structures" seen and unseen that are a part of culture, society, and government. Powers that hold sway over human life include class, public interest, accepted morality, decency, religious, intellectual and moral structures, as well as political structures such as the market, school, and nation.²²⁰ These powers, while now fallen and rebellious, were created by God and are necessary. As Yoder asserts of the powers, "*we can not live with them*" and "*we can not live without them.*"²²¹ Indeed God can use any of the powers for good.²²² Nonetheless the powers are prone to rebellion, are not ultimate, and are not to be seen as ends in themselves because the cross and resurrection have broken their power, or disarmed them, ushering in a new age.

218. John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2002), 9.

219. In 1962 John H. Yoder translated Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* from Dutch into English. A revised edition is now in current publication. See Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1977). For an overview of how Yoder's eschatology follows the work his teacher Oscar Cullman see Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics*, 114–30.

220. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 142–43.

221. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 143 Emphasis original.

222. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 142.

Yoder names the age ushered in by the redemptive work of Christ – from Pentecost to *parousia* – a “new eon” which coexists with the “old eon.” The social manifestation of the old eon is the world, while the social manifestation of the new eon is the “body of Christ.” However the new eon ushered in by Christ, sealed and guaranteed by the cross and resurrection, is not yet fully realized. The church looks to Christ and points forward “to the fullness of the kingdom of God, of which it is a foretaste.”²²³ While the old eon continues to exist and take on a seemingly powerful role in all of life, its eventual destruction is sealed by Christ who reigns and who will put “all enemies under his feet.” (I Corinthians 15:27).²²⁴

Living with the Rebellious Powers

How does the Christian live now with the rebellious powers? Yoder has three responses - all which speak of God’s agency and grace over both the church and the world: 1) God is the agent of justice and God alone brings about the end and the peaceable Kingdom of God. 2) The church is to constantly loop back to the life and work of Jesus which led to the cross and the triumphal resurrection - as a way to understand how to live and serve God in the present eon. 3) What the work of Christ in his life, death and resurrection point to is a cross-resurrection “logic” which centres on obedience to Christ as Lord and leaves effectiveness or “blessing” to God. These answers to the question of how the Christian lives in the midst of the swirling rebellious power will be treated in turn.

Firstly, drawing on the book of Revelation, Yoder asserts that God alone brings the Kingdom of God. The church can not claim this responsibility: “The agent in judgment is not the church, for the church suffers nonresistantly.” The church suffers patience and endurance while worshipping the lamb (Revelation 6:9-11; 13:10,14:12). The state does not bring the Kingdom

223. John Howard Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. and comp. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 146.

224. Yoder, *The Christian Witness*, 9. The biblical passages Yoder uses in his discussion of eschatology include Colossians 1-2, Romans 8, Ephesians 2,3 & 6 and Galatians 4.

either with its violence and power. The state “has a role ‘within’ history but not to bring about the end. ... in fact it increasingly is an enemy of Christ – (anti-Christ).” Rather, “God’s agent is his own miraculous Word, the sword coming from the mouth of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who is astride the white horse (Revelation 19).” The message here for heads of state, pie-in-the-sky revolutionaries, as well as pacifists is that “the responsibility for bringing about victory (as seen in the cross as well) is God’s alone.”²²⁵ That God will bring about the end places both the state and the church under the reign of Christ, signalling that humans, Christian or otherwise, are not the primary agents of history.

Secondly, the clues for how to live in the midst of the rebellious powers come from Jesus himself. In the last chapter of *The Politics of Jesus*, entitled “The War of the Lamb,” Yoder notes that the early church’s worship was characterized by the image of the slaughtered lamb who had “conquered” and was the “key to history” as the only one who could open the seal (Revelation 5). The loving and sacrificed lamb – weak by human standards yet now worshipped on the throne – was more powerful than any earthly rulers or powers. This lamb, the resurrected Christ sitting on the throne, is not to be divided from the Christ who in his earthly life loved at all costs, even to the point of death. The image of the lamb of God in Revelation hearkens back to

the work of Christ himself, whose choice of suffering servanthood, rather than violent lordship, of love to the point of death rather than righteousness backed by power, was itself the fundamental direction of his life. Jesus was so faithful to the enemy-love of God that it cost him all his effectiveness; he gave up every handle on history.²²⁶

It was by giving up “every handle on history,” by not trying to be “effective,” that Jesus was able to disarm the powers. He gave up what was deemed to be “effective” as defined by the old eon, deferring rather to God in obedience to the point of death. Yoder notes: “Effectiveness and success had been sacrificed for the sake of love, but this sacrifice was turned by God into victory [through the resurrection] that vindicated to the utmost the apparent impotence of love.”²²⁷

225. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 152.

226. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 233.

227. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 148.

From the vantage point of the defeated powers and the lamb on the throne in Revelation, the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels can be seen as one of denying the “powers” at every turn. Jesus refused to make nation, ethnicity and even family absolute.²²⁸ His most telling confrontation of the powers was his refusal to take up the violent Zealot option which would have meant using violence as an effective tool to bring about the Kingdom.²²⁹ Rather, Jesus loved and forgave rather than attempted to be effective according to the powers. When God vindicated Jesus’ loving obedience in the resurrection, the powers were shown for what they were: they were so much less than God’s *agape* love shown in Jesus’ life and death:

Christ is *agape*; self-giving, non-resistant love. At the cross this non-resistance, including the refusal to use political means to self-defense, found its ultimate revelation in the uncomplaining and forgiving death of the innocent at the hands of the guilty. This death reveals how God deals with evil; here is the only valid starting point for Christian pacifism or non-resistance. The cross is the extreme demonstration that seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.²³⁰

Yoder continues: “But the cross is not defeat. Christ’s obedience unto death was crowned by the miracle of the resurrection and the exaltation at the right hand of God.”²³¹ In the resurrection God showed through Christ that *agape* love and weakness are the “keys to history.”

The third response to how the Christian lives in the midst of the rebellious power has to do with obedience in following Jesus. It is here on the issue of obedience-rather-than-effectiveness where Yoder notes that the Christian “follows after,” or “participates with” or “imitates” Jesus. “Bearing the cross” is not about trite emotional or family issues as it has come to mean in the individualist Western world, but centres on following Christ in being obedient in love rather than being effective.²³²

The Christian gives up effectiveness – which in so many situations uses violent means to meet supposed peaceful ends – following the loving and cross-bearing way of Christ. The cross

228. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 148.

229. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 36–45.

230. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 147.

231. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 147.

232. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 112–33.

and resurrection have justified and reconciled the Christian already, but the New Testament bears witness that by being justified and reconciled to Christ the Christian now “shares” or “participates” in the cross and resurrection of Christ:

Nonresistance is thus not a matter of legalism but of discipleship, not “thou shalt not” but “as he is, so we are in this world” (1 John 4:17), and it is especially in relation to evil that discipleship is meaningful. Every strand of New Testament literature testifies to a direct relationship between the way Christ suffered on the cross and the way the Christian, as disciple, is called to suffer in the face of evil (Matt. 10: 38; Mark 10:38f; 8:34f.; Luke 14:27). Solidarity with Christ (“discipleship”) must often be in tension with the wider human solidarity (John 15:20; 2 Cor. 1:5, 4:10; Phil. 1:29; 2:5-8; 3:10; Col. 1:24f.; Heb. 12:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:21f.; Rev. 12:11).²³³

Here the phrase “Jesus is Lord” and “obedience” come together as a way to place human agency in the context of God’s providence and grace. That Jesus is Lord means that the Christian surrenders all other loyalties, as Christ did, in obedience to God. Obedience, as Yoder uses the term, is not to be seen in a legalist way, but is rather a claim that the Christian is ultimately loyal only to Christ. All other sovereigns, all other powers including family, state and even models of effectiveness and responsibility fall away. This includes as well all ethical systems that are not based on the *agape* that is demonstrated and offered by Christ.

In the cross and resurrection of Christ, seen eschatologically, Yoder provides an alternative to the cause-effect logic or effectiveness logic of the old eon. The new eon’s “logic” is that of cross-resurrection. Christian witness does not base its work on cause and effect, but rather on cross-resurrection logic, fully placing all human work in the context of God’s sovereignty. Here Yoder contrasts the use of the sword, which has its roots in cause-effect thinking, to the logic of cross-resurrection:

The cross is not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of history. The key to the obedience of God’s people is not their effectiveness but their patience (Rev. 13:10). The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and the other kinds of power in every human conflict; the triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of

233. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 148.

God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.²³⁴

Yoder's critique of those Christians who would justify violence to meet even good ends is also leveled at pacifists:

The Christian pacifism which has its theological basis in the character of God and the work of Jesus Christ is one in which the calculating link between our obedience and ultimate efficacy has been broken since the triumph of God comes through resurrection and not through effective sovereignty or assured survival.²³⁵

The Riddle of Cross-Resurrection Logic

What does cross-resurrection logic mean concretely for Christian ethics? Harry Huebner makes four clarifying points which place Yoder's view of cross-resurrection logic in the context of God's sovereignty and grace. Firstly, obedience to Jesus as Lord is more important than any of the theories or strategies we produce. Huebner states: "The guarantee of our rightness lies not in the theories we produce but in our obedience to the One who is in charge." We strive not to get the "right" theories or strategies, though they might be helpful, but to give our allegiance to God in Christ.²³⁶ Secondly, as seen in the cross and resurrection, in biblical accounts, and throughout Christian history, "God blesses the actions of the faithful." Christians take it as their "honor to be involved in God's work, not as primary agents of change but as bearers of witness to what God is doing in the world."²³⁷ Thirdly, Huebner notes that Yoder is not against effectiveness as such but is trying to point that when effectiveness language is used, whether we pose a violent or pacifist option, we assume "that the future of the world is in our hands."²³⁸ Fourth, cross-resurrection logic gives a "doxological" rather than "engineering" view of history. Christians are witnesses to God or worshipers of God, and not "agents charged with moving the 'messed up world' from here to there." As witnesses and worshipers we are being trained to see where God is working in

234. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 232.

235. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 239.

236. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 125.

237. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 125–26.

238. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 126.

the world to bring salvation, healing, and setting free, and are invited to participate in what God is doing.²³⁹ In short, the Christian proclaims in word and deed and leaves engineering to God.

In sum, “Jesus is Lord” means that the Christian – following the model of Christ – seeks to be obedient rather than effective. This gives priority to God’s sovereignty and providential grace rather than humanly trying to make history turn out right. The Christian follows cross-resurrection logic rather than pragmatics or cause-effect logic when making ethical decisions. As an illustration, I turn to Yoder’s view of pacifism. Yoder’s pacifism is not based on cause-effect notions of “building a better world,” but is rather based on God’s gracious sovereignty. Nonviolence for Yoder is not derived from philosophy or a calculation on its effectiveness but rather derived from the life of Christ in light of the cross and resurrection.²⁴⁰ Pacifism for Yoder “does not guarantee a warless world” but is a “way” or a “hope” that may not see results as such. It is not the present realities of what works or what does not work in the Christian’s work of reconciliation. It is a matter of faith and hope in God’s providential grace which will bring about such a peace.²⁴¹

We have gathered from the section on eschatology that for Yoder the church’s primary focus is on Jesus as Lord. The church is Christ’s body, which is a “sign” and “witness” or “foretaste” of the coming Kingdom. The new eon which has dawned in Christ gives the church a special vocation relative to the old eon. Jesus’ Lordship means that the church participates with, follows and worships God to the abandonment of all powers. The church is empowered by the Holy Spirit which is the “down payment” on the coming glory which God will bring about. In the struggle where the new and old eons clash, the church lives by cross-resurrection logic rather than cause-effect logic even if this means costly discipleship. Trust in God’s providential grace, which will bring about the Kingdom, means that the church lives in obedience to Jesus the Lord

239. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 126.

240. See Yoder, *Nevertheless* In this popular book Yoder describes 24 different types of religious pacifism. The one that he aligns himself with he calls the pacifism of the Messianic community which “affirms dependence upon the confession that Jesus is Christ and that Jesus Christ is Lord.” (133).

241. Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” 145.

rather than to human effectiveness or pragmatics. That this will be controversial and even costly is a given. The church nonetheless sees the cross and weakness as the way forward – for the lamb has already conquered, and the church follows.

Yoder in Conversation on Eschatology

Three issues with regard to the character of Yoder’s eschatology will be treated here. Firstly, Yoder’s eschatological stance is contrasted with that of the eschatological view of “social gospel.” Secondly, Yoder’s eschatology is placed in the context of, and critiqued from, a “radically transcendent” view of eschatology, noted by A. James Reimer. Lastly, I note where Yoder’s clear affirmation of God’s providential grace, combined with Reimer’s concern for the personal, could be used for witness to those who have guilt and anxiety in Mennonite and other circles over not being able to solve the world’s problems.

Yoder’s eschatology with Jesus as Lord, and obedience to Jesus rather than effectiveness in the world’s eyes, differs from the eschatology of Walter Rauchenbusch. Reinhard Hutter, quoted in Harry Huebner’s *Echoes of the Word*, offers a helpful way of distancing Yoder from Rauchenbusch. Here the role of the church in relation to the eschatology of Rauchenbusch and Yoder are contrasted:

For Rauchenbusch the church is responsible for the course of history The church has to take the crucial function of a socio-political “midwife” helping to bring to birth that very “Kingdom of God” which “history” carries in its womb. The fulfillment of history lies in its intrinsic telos of a universal society of brotherhood and cooperative fellowship In such a setting, “effectiveness” has priority and might imply the use of violence for the sake of the goal to be reached For Yoder it is exactly the opposite: *eschatology turns into history* in the form of the concrete and particular history of the “new order” of the church. For those who can say “Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur” (*The Politics of Jesus*, 250) the eschaton became history Therefore not “effectiveness” but rather “obedience” represents for Yoder the decisive criterion for the church’s activity.²⁴²

Huebner rightly comments here that Rauchenbusch sees the church as “Christianizing the social order” while Yoder’s cross-resurrection logic looks back to Jesus who

242. Reinhard Hutter, “The Church: Midwife of History or Witness of the Eschaton?” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (Spring 1990): 47, cited in Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 69.

did not bring the kingdom by “christianizing” the social order but rather brought about the kingdom by bearing witness to God’s grace and then allowing its power to blossom into a new reality in spite of the powers of evil.²⁴³

The church’s task here is to be “a sign of the new, but the realization of the new is a gift from God.”²⁴⁴

A critique of the character of Yoder’s eschatology is leveled by A. James Reimer. While agreeing largely with Yoder’s view of the social-political Jesus, and while himself a pacifist, Reimer questions Yoder’s eschatology for being linear and historicist in nature. Reimer, who is interested in wedding “strong [Mennonite] historical-ethical concerns within a larger and sounder theological context,”²⁴⁵ turns to David Tracy, agreeing with him that the “prophetical-ethical” (concentration on the historical and ethical) and the “metaphysical-aesthetical” (concentration on the sacramental, priestly, and existential) aspects of religious life need to be brought together.²⁴⁶ Reimer finds that Yoder tends toward the “prophetical-ethical,” and largely misses the “metaphysical-aesthetical.”

Yoder offers a powerful political reading of the New Testament which unfortunately devalues the existential-sacramental power of Jesus’ message – that part having to do with divine grace, the personal forgiveness of sin, the inner renewal of the Spirit, and the individual’s stance before God.²⁴⁷

Reimer contends that by staying within a prophetical-ethical model, Yoder’s eschatology is limited to the historical which does not take God’s radical transcendence, as noted in classical Trinitarian theology, seriously enough. In the classical tradition, Reimer argues, “there is the possibility of a breaking into history of a transcendent, non-historical reality – a reality which itself is not defined in terms of history.” The classical view puts history in “a larger ontological, metaphysical and cosmic framework.” At the same time, on an individual level, the classical

243. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 70.

244. Huebner, *Echos of the Word*, 71.

245. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 179.

246. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 200–01.

247. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 293.

view claims that “myth, ritual, cult, liturgy, art and sacrament [i.e. the metaphysical - aesthetical] are important means of experiencing ‘timelessness’ within history.”²⁴⁸

In short, Reimer sees Yoder as neglecting or downplaying God’s transcendence, and the *experience* of such, with Yoder’s social-political Jesus who calls a social group into being for the purposes of acting ethically in history in the expectation of the coming Kingdom. Here Reimer wonders if Yoder has reduced eschatology to ethics. Is Yoder’s legacy in general that he reduces theology to “social ethics and activism?”²⁴⁹

What is at issue here between Yoder and Reimer has to do with different frameworks for transcendence as well as differing views of the language one might use in mission. I will treat these two issues in turn: Yoder’s view of transcendence owes much to a biblical-Hebraic framework, while Reimer – with his argument from classical Trinitarian theology – views transcendence in both Hellenistic and biblical-Hebraic frameworks.

Yoder, in his essay “Ethics and Eschatology”, discusses the radical transcendence of God as different from the modern view of transcendence but does so from the vantage point of a *biblical* view of transcendence, basing his work on apocalyptic and prophetic literature. Here Yoder attempts to distance himself from the reduction of eschatology to ethics. The biblical world-view, Yoder notes in “Ethics and Eschatology”, clashes with the modern “causal nexus” because it comes from a framework where to “expect a miracle from God is entirely appropriate.”²⁵⁰ The way the Bible presents transcendence is different than the way transcendence is spoken of in the current era:

In our age “transcendence” is sometimes a code word for the fact that, from within our own system, we know ourselves to be finite, thereby creating by extrapolation the notion of “beyond” even though there be nothing (we can know) “out there.” Prophetic transcendence comes from the other end; the “beyond” came first. Divine command, divine agency, divine will are prior to, not derived from, extrapolated from our finitude.²⁵¹

248. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 201.

249. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 200.

250. John Howard Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” *Ex Auditu* 6 (1990): 121.

251. Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 126.

At the conclusion of this essay Yoder firmly critiques a view of eschatology which is merely historical and reductionistic. Yoder disagrees with John J. Collins' reading of the eschatological and apocalyptic:

To say simply, as Collins does, that 'apocalypse is validated by the ethics it sustains' would be a wrongly reductionistic horizontalism. It would be self-defeating, since the vision will only support the ethos if the seer considers God and the revelation to be real.²⁵²

In "Ethics and Eschatology" we see Yoder clearly affirming the transcendence of God. We also see Yoder distancing himself "from the perspective that would utilize apocalyptic or eschatological thought *only* because it validates a particular ethic."²⁵³ "Ethics and Eschatology", in my mind, places Yoder's eschatology out of the merely historical realm and into a transcendent realm. Reimer might agree with this but only under the proviso that Yoder's notion of transcendence is biblical-Hebraic and not Hellenistic.

On the issue of mission and witness in relation to God's transcendence and gracious providence, Reimer and Yoder disagree – and here I side with Reimer. Yoder feels strongly that in the interests of witness in the twentieth century, the phrase "Jesus as Lord" – and with this God's transcendence – needs to be translated into historical terms. For instance in Yoder's article "Would we see Jesus," he claims that Christians need to "take the low road to general validity" in witness. That is, rather than witness to the transcendent grace of the God who is "beyond our ken" Yoder suggests that we speak of the grace lived out in the life of Jesus:

For in our world it will be his ordinariness as villager, as rabbi, as King on a donkey, as a liberator on a cross that we shall be able to express the claims which the apostolic proclaimers to Hellenism expressed in the language of preexistence and condescension. This is not to lower our sights or to retract our proclamation. It is to renew the description of Christ crucified as the wisdom and power of God.²⁵⁴

I agree with Yoder that witness to Jesus' Lordship in many circumstances can certainly start by

252. Yoder, "Ethics and Eschatology," 126.

253. Mark Thiessen Nation, "Mending Fences & Finding Grace: Regarding Divine Agency and Divine Grace in John Howard Yoder's Thought," Conference Presentation at Inheriting John Yoder (Toronto, 2007), 8.

254. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 62.

sharing stories of earthy and loving acts of Jesus. However, I disagree that speaking of God's transcendence, of "preexistence or condescension," would always meet with closed ears. I think Yoder has misread the times if he thinks that "postmodern" North Americans do not speak and think within cosmic or transcendent frameworks. In an age of *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, variously constructed spiritualities, and fascination with the paranormal, there is much room for speaking about God, Jesus and the Spirit in radically transcendent, non-historical ways, and even Hellenistic ways. Creativity is still key though. A. James Reimer, not only in his academic work, but also in a small popular volume entitled *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Faith*, works creatively, entertainingly, and with great depth as he explores the Christian faith and God's radical transcendence.²⁵⁵

On the topic of Christian social action and peace witness, one could join Reimer's argument for the existential and personal with Yoder's affirmation of God's providential grace. Yoder misses a great opportunity to preach to those Christians involved in social action or peace witness when he avoids or sidelines personal guilt and anxiety, as documented above. The person with anxiety over the outcome of history, as well as guilt experiences over never being able "to do enough" to move the world in the right direction is in need of a word of God's providential grace. Yet Yoder can hardly give this word because he neglects to fully develop an understanding of these personal and existential issues – preferring rather to focus on the social and the political. Ted Koontz, a life-time Yoder scholar, Mennonite, and pacifist, notes that God's grace is crucial for the peacemaker. Koontz brings together God's grace, personal piety, and pacifism – topics too often not treated together:

I know it is easier to walk as a peacemaker when I know afresh God's graciousness than when I try to do so because I feel I must. For many difficult years I tried to be a good Mennonite pacifist, but with very little personal appropriation of God's graciousness. Even though that graciousness has become far more real to me in the last few years, I routinely slip out of living in awareness of it. The weight of being "good"– especially as

255. A. James Reimer, *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2003). This book is widely used by youths and adults in Mennonite churches in Sunday school and catechism classes.

extremely and oddly "good" as nonresistance expects us to be – is often more than can be sustained by a sense of duty.²⁵⁶

Still, Yoder's affirmation of God's providential grace which means that we do not have to move society "from here to there," or "make history turn out right," but join in what God is doing in the world, is a powerful word of grace for those experiencing anxiety over the outcome of history, and guilt for not doing enough. Letting God bring the coming Kingdom, because that is God's work of providential grace, ought to come as a word of relief – a word of grace.

Conclusions

Yoder will loop back to the ethical life of Jesus and loop around to the ethical life of the believer on any given theological topic. Weaknesses to this approach have been noted. Yoder at times appears reductionistic. His looping back to Jesus and looping around to the disciple can look as though he is "radically historical" at the expense of the transcendent. He can appear as though he is also dealing only with human agency when the bulk of his writings deal with issues of Christian practice such as community, nonviolence and discipleship. Yet, as has been seen, weaved into these loops are God's grace as empowerment and favour, the former being the more common. The reconciling work of the Christian has its starting point and foundation in the reconciling work of God in Christ. Jesus' life, teachings, cross, resurrection and Lordship, which bespeak God's providential grace, are the only context in which the Christian can view history, and practice loving nonviolence. The church, granted through God in Christ, and empowered by the Spirit, is the only firm foundation for Christian ethics to be fostered and embodied.

Yoder misses some loops, which as an Anabaptist-Mennonite theology of grace matures, may be worked on. One would wish that Yoder would loop back to the rich sacramental tradition in his ecclesiology, for his church looks at times like it has all that it needs in its own social process. In his work on justification, connection to and integration with the issue of the

256. Ted Koontz, "Grace to You and Peace: Nonresistance as Piety," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69, no. 3 (July 1995): 357.

existential and personal would strengthen his work on the social and political aspects justification. In his work on eschatology, a loop that would tie his rich notion of God's providential grace to the personal and existential level of guilt and anxiety would be welcome.

It has been shown here that much of Yoder's work on Christian ethics is missed if the reader does not discover Yoder's connection to God's grace. Yoder's work is not simply a reiteration of the Social Gospel movement nor of Christian liberalism. He is rooted in a strong discipleship theology which is at home in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Yoder makes strong links at times with God's grace; other times it is weak. In either case, his work on grace is not fully developed. He assumes grace; if asked he will connect Christian ethics and discipleship to grace, but grace is not a central theme in Yoder's theological-ethics.

Yoder's account of Jesus and his call to discipleship is to be carried forward in this study; but Yoder's account of God's grace in connection to this discipleship will need to be made stronger. I am not disregarding Yoder's strong call to discipleship. Rather, I will continue to see how grace and discipleship can be better integrated for the sake of preaching where God's grace is central, and the call to discipleship is clear. We have seen in this chapter that there are those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite community such as A. James Riemer who are attempting to speak of a closer connection between grace and discipleship. Above we saw how Michael Gorman and Richard Hays are able to connect a deep concern for discipleship with a deep sense of God's grace active as pardon and as empowerment. We go now to ponder another way of characterizing theological ethics. In the next chapter we attend to a conservative Lutheran theological-ethicist, Oswald Bayer. Here we will be able to clarify some differences between two traditions, but also note some similarities, and places where we might imagine new connections between God's grace and Christian discipleship.

CHAPTER 3

OSWALD BAYER ON GOD’S PROMISE AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In the interest of moving grace to the centre of the sermon I have looked to scholarship on reading Paul with an interest in grace and ethics, as well as the place of God’s grace in John Howard Yoder’s theological ethics. In the case of Pauline studies on the logic of grace and ethics, it is clear that whether one uses an indicative/imperative, narrative, or spirituality lens that God’s grace precedes Christian ethics. As was stated below, “Being precedes act.” There is no way to discuss Christian ethics, discipleship, or Christian behaviour without first claiming that God’s grace is prior to and is the source of life and action for the Christian. The Christian, and the Christian community, is in the sphere of God’s grace where there is a certain identity granted which includes obedience to God in Christ. John Howard Yoder’s approach to God’s grace in connection with following Jesus was found wanting. He makes some vital connections at times between God’s grace and Christian discipleship but these connections are few and often undeveloped. He prefers a social agenda over a personal agenda, often leaving the reader wondering about personal aspects of faith such as guilt. At the same time, Yoder is characterizing the connection of God’s grace to ethics in a way unlike that of classic liberalism. The Christian is not acting in the world so that history turns out right – for this is God’s work. We turn now to a theologian who is perhaps as unlike Yoder as might be possible. Bayer is not interested in Yoder’s development of Jesus as model for Christian discipleship. Bayer starts in an entirely different place – that of God’s word of promise – in developing his theological ethics. I looked at how God’s grace is connected to ethics in the work of an Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian. Now we look for how ethics is connected to God’s grace in the work of a Lutheran theologian.

Introduction

In the interest of moving grace to the centre of the sermon I turn now to the scholarship of Oswald Bayer. In the previous and present chapter I am engaging in an ecumenical “cross-reading” of God’s grace and Christian ethics. I am looking for grace in Mennonite theology and for ethics in Lutheran theology. I have explored the place of God’s grace and ethics in the work of an Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian who primarily is known for his views on Christian discipleship, ethics, and especially Christian pacifism. I now turn to Oswald Bayer’s work in order to explore how ethics is treated and connected to God’s grace in a tradition where God’s grace is central historically and theologically. The caricature which I grew up with as a Mennonite, and which still persists, as we have seen above, is that Luther – and by implication Lutherans – are less concerned with ethics precisely because they have such a high theology of grace. The argument goes the other way as well. Anabaptist-Mennonites were and are caricatured as ignoring the grace of God given such a developed theology of discipleship. This cross-reading is a way of exploring these caricatures of each other. In addition, I am asking what Mennonites might learn from Lutherans on the topic of grace, as Anabaptist-Mennonites in North America further explore God’s grace and place discipleship in that context. It may be that Lutherans may learn from this cross-reading; however, this dissertation, and especially this chapter, is an attempt to understand if there is anything in Bayer’s way of characterizing theology that will help to move God’s grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon.

Oswald Bayer (1939 –) is a German Luther scholar and theologian. Presently he is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Germany. Before coming to Tübingen, he was professor of Systematic Theology at the University Bochum. In 1979 he became the director of the Institute for Christian Social Ethics at the University of Tübingen and then in 1995 he moved to the chair of systematic theology.²⁵⁷ Bayer is also an ordained pastor of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in

257. Christine Helmer, “The Subject of Theology in the Thought of Oswald Bayer,” *Lutheran*

Württemberg. He is a Luther scholar, as we shall see, but also a scholar of Johann Georg Hamann, a Lutheran friend and critic of Immanuel Kant. Bayer is known for his work in social ethics, but most well known for his work on the early Luther and his development of God's *promissio*: God's effective word of grace for humanity.²⁵⁸ I begin here with an introduction to what Bayer means by God's *promissio* and the way that Bayer connects God's *promissio* to various theological themes. This section sets the stage for understanding how God's grace and Christian response are understood in the context of justification/sanctification, ecclesiology and eschatology. I will note at the end of major sections some of the ways in which Bayer's and Yoder's theological ethics come together and where they diverge.

An Introduction to *Promissio*

For Oswald Bayer, the point of departure for all theology is God's promise (*promissio*) addressed to humanity. God's promise is not to be understood as one topic within systematic theology nor the crown of such a systematic theology. Theology is the study and appreciation of the eventful and efficacious promises of God. Here promise is not meant in a general or conceptual way— as in, “God is a God of promise” — but rather in a way which is direct, relational and eventful. Bayer's theology finds its home in a particular form found in the scriptures; those lines of the text, or, better stated, those events of speech where God makes promises to humanity. Bayer affirms that his Bible is not flat and that he is working with “very specific form-critical observations.”²⁵⁹ As attested in scripture, God speaks promises and does so expecting human response. What follows is an example of texts of promise:

I will take you as my own people and I will be your God. (Exodus. 6:7)

“Do not fear, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1)

Quarterly 14, no. 1 (2000): 21.

258. Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007), v.

259. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 54.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout ... so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

“Do not be afraid ... to you is born this day ... a Saviour.” (Luke 2:10)

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) ²⁶⁰

What follows is an example of Bayer stringing his own verses together to show promissory texts:

His word is of this kind: Let there be light and there *was* light (Gen 1:3). Be healed! (Mark 5:34) and she *was* healed. *Talitha koum* (I say to you, get up) and immediately the girl *stood up* (Mark 5:41). *Ephphatha* (Be opened!)—and the man's ears *were* opened (Mark 7:34). Your sins are forgiven! (Mark 2:5) and they *are* forgiven.²⁶¹

To go beyond these direct, scriptural, eventful, and speech-based promises of God is to play a dangerous game of abstraction which leads away from worship of God and theology proper.

With God's *promissio* at the centre of theology, theology is not a body of knowledge, a focus on how Christians should act, nor an attempt to get “behind” the direct promises of God recorded in scripture:

Since the subject of theology is constituted as that which happens through speaking, one can express it negatively: theology is not primarily focused on a body of knowledge (the theoretical misunderstanding) or on a body of action (the moral misunderstanding). It also does not deal with something that is more original and that is actually behind the Word, providing a foundation for it (the psychological misunderstanding). It focuses instead on those elementary speech acts in which law and gospel happen in a concrete way.²⁶²

Stated in the affirmative, theology is the study, appropriation, and the preaching of the concrete promises of God spoken in the Bible. Knowledge and morality are crucial for Bayer, as will be seen below; however, knowledge and morality must always be linked to God's verbal promises.

God is first and foremost one whose promises can be trusted:

God's truth and will are not abstract entities but are directed verbally and publicly as a concrete problem to a particular hearer in a specific situation. “God” is apprehended as the

260. Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 51; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 258; Oswald Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2009): 249–69.

261. Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 250.

262. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 42.

one who makes a promise to a human being in such a way that the person who hears it can have full confidence in it.”²⁶³

Promise as Speech-Act: Martin Luther's Discovery

A life-time Luther scholar, Bayer argues that Luther's central “Reformational discovery” was God's sure and effective verbal *promissio*. Justification by grace through faith and the distinguishing of law and gospel are closely connected to God's promise and get no short treatment by Bayer; however, Luther's primary discovery and the topic which he wrote about throughout his life was God's *promissio*. When God speaks it is true and effective in that moment when it is spoken. When God speaks promises through the scripture, the sermon, and through baptism and the table, those promises are made true and effective in their hearing. Just as in the creation of the world, when God speaks, speech and action occur at the same time.²⁶⁴ God's addresses of promise to humanity are speech-acts: the words which are spoken are made effective in their very speaking.²⁶⁵

Martin Luther's writings as early as 1518 show a profound grappling with what God is doing when words of forgiveness are uttered by a priest “on behalf” of God.²⁶⁶ Like all Roman Catholic priests of his time, Luther at first understood the word of absolution, “I absolve you of your sins!” as a declaration of what had already been performed by God. As a declaration, the priest absolves the repentant person primarily to assure that person that God is one who absolves in a general sense, and that indeed has absolved this person. But the words of the priest here are only linguistic signs that point to what God *has done*: God is not actually present but distant - acting in the past. In this case “I absolve you of your sins!” is really only information about God

263. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 53.

264. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 95.

265. Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 51–52.

266. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 49. Bayer cites Luther's *Pro veritate et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis* (“For the Investigation of Truth and for the Comfort of Troubled Consciences”) as the earliest writing on God's action in the words of absolution. Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe)*, 65 Vols. (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883–1993), 1:629–33. (Hereafter *WA*)

but not an action of God in the present. As comforting as this word *about* God may be, words as “declarative” do not make God present as an active doer of God’s own word. What Luther discovered was that to say, “I absolve you of your sins!” does not simply point to anything or anyone, but rather is the word itself in which God grants absolution in the present. The word itself “actually constitutes a reality.”²⁶⁷ Bayer notes Luther’s central discovery: “That the *signum* itself is already the *res*, that *the linguistic sign is already the matter itself* — that was Luther’s greatest hermeneutical discovery, his reformational discovery in the strictest sense.”²⁶⁸ God is not an absent reality but a present actor in the very words uttered by the priest to the one begging for forgiveness. The word of the priest is a speech-act, an “effective, active word that establishes community and therein frees and makes certain. It does what it says, it says what it does.”²⁶⁹ Pardon, remission of sin, justification and liberation occur precisely in the spoken word, uttered by a fellow human being. Later, Luther would speak of this effective word as a way to distinguish between philosophy and theology: “The philosophical sign is the mark of something that is absent; the theological sign is the mark of something present.”²⁷⁰

God’s eventful promise is not limited to absolution but is effective in other utterances made in the context of the church. Words of promise spoken in baptism, the Lord’s supper, in the reading of scripture, and in preaching serve as speech-acts.²⁷¹ The word does what it says when humans utter the promises of God in the context of the church. Hearing “This is my body given for you,” when receiving the bread is a sure and clear gift from God to the believer in that moment. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” is an effective word. Hearing the words “Fear not,” or “To you is born today a Saviour,” at the Christmas Eve worship service does not only recall a past where angels spoke God’s promise to shepherds, but

267. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 53.

268. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 52.

269. Oswald Bayer, “Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture,” trans. Mark Mattes, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

270. Martin Luther, *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe Trischreden*, 6 Vols. (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1912–21), 4:666.8f.

271. Bayer, “Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture,” 76.

more, is a sure word spoken by God through the voice of a fellow human.²⁷² Christ is made present in the hearing of such words of promise: “They [the words of promise] are the concrete way and manner in which Christ is present: definite and clear — clearly freeing one and giving one assurance.”²⁷³ In short, any promise given in scripture, sermon, baptism and table, in the context of the church, is God saying, “I am for you.”²⁷⁴

For Bayer, following Luther, God’s *promissio* can be understood as granting confidence to the believer in the midst of the trials of life, and of the uncertainty of God’s grace. Bayer cites Luther’s celebrative words on God’s sure promise to Jacob:

I have been baptized. I have been absolved. In this faith I die. No matter what trials and cares confront me from now on, I will certainly not be shaken; for He who said: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16) and "Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19) and "This is My body, This is My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" (cf. Matt. 26:26, 28)—He cannot deceive or lie. This is certainly true.²⁷⁵

Bayer, like Luther, relies heavily on such scriptural lines of promise, for these are the places where God’s voice can be heard with clarity. More than this, in their voicing, the promises therein are made certain.

Promise, Relationship, and Language

Speech-act assumes both dialogue and a relationship between the one speaking and the one being addressed. Bayer follows the work of John L. Austin, noting that to make a promise not only assures but establishes relationship.²⁷⁶ God’s promise to the creature is not for the sake of address alone but for the sake of relationship. However, the relationship is certainly not one of equals. Rather, following Luther, Bayer addresses the strict difference between God and

272. Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Afternoon of Christmas Day (1530),” in *Martin Luther’s Theological Writings*, Second ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 197–201.

273. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 53.

274. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 51.

275. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 55 Vols., ed. Jeroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–86), 193–94 (here after *LW*), in Oswald Bayer, “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1999): 43

276. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 50–51 Bayer refers here to John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

humanity. Luther's *homo peccator et Deus iustificans* (the sinning human being and the justifying God) declares the identity of each and the utterly dependant relationship that the human has toward God. While there is a strict difference between the human and God, the *et* in Luther's line describes the relationship which occurs in dialogue: "The sinning human being and the justifying God coexist when they are in dialogue."²⁷⁷

Language is crucial. For Bayer, it is not just that God and humans relate, and sometimes use dialogue with one another; rather, dialogue – God's address and human response – is the locus of the relationship, the relationship between that of saviour and sinner: "*God and humans coexist in the Word: in the Word of the confession of sins and in the Word of the forgiveness of sins.*"²⁷⁸

In sum, language does not simply convey information. It is rather the horizon of reality. All we can know is what language reveals and conceals. Here Bayer is following not only contemporary speech-act theorists such as Austin, but also following the work of the Lutheran Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), a friend and intellectual opponent of Immanuel Kant. Hamann critiqued not only Kant but the entire Enlightenment project as highly anthropocentric. Hamann brings Luther to bear on the anti-sensual, anti-physical, highly rationalistic theology of the Enlightenment. Bayer, following Hamann, argues that meaning is not to be found in detachment from culture, history, the physical, experience, and language; rather, it is to be found precisely in those places. In other words, God is not to be found as an object of individual speculation from the detached rational human; rather, it is turned around entirely: God will find persons precisely through history, physicality, experience, and language.²⁷⁹ God reveals, God discovers and finds humanity through the material. God comes from the outside, but comes intimately, in friction and sound, in faith and not in certainty:

277. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 39.

278. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 39. His emphasis.

279. Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 150–51.

As the external and physical Word, as a voice, as a call, cry, lament, and praise, briefly: its own nature what is articulated verbally and externally, the gospel does not allow itself to be drawn or taken back as one's own private possession without friction and without sound; instead, it guards against that. The Christian is never certain of the freedom that his faith entails, never certain of what happens in the self, but apprehends it on the basis of the external, verbal Word that is articulated in open battle.²⁸⁰

In speaking God's direct *promissio* in the context of the church and its worship, we are speaking here of nothing less than proclamation. To speak God's effective word of promise in preaching, which is always connected to the table and to baptism, is to proclaim. Proclamation differs from other forms of address commonly understood as preaching:

The proclaimed word is not primarily statement, appeal, or expression.... For the word and faith are closely connected: as the word, so faith. If the proclaimed word is statement and demonstration, then faith is insight and knowledge. If however the word is appeal, then faith is actually its enactment in the deed, its realization in the form of a theory or an idea. Again, if the proclaimed word is expression, then faith is a fundamental part or experience of human life as such. Only if the word is promise and gift, is it really faith.²⁸¹

Proclamation is a *promissio* that forms relationship. It is not about something but "in the second person, where an I addresses you" in the perfect or present perfect.²⁸²

Promise and Community

Hearing God's word of promise from another in the context of worship is crucial for Bayer's ecclesiology, as will be noted below. Because meaning and relationship exist in the world of language with another, the human cannot assure the self with self-talk. The word of promise has to come from another. Therefore the Christian community is crucial, and not an addendum to God's *promissio* and human response. Only in community – within earshot of the voice of another – can God's voice be heard and thus made effective: "I cannot say it to myself. It has to be spoken to me."²⁸³ For Bayer, the focus on speech, sound, and friction, which necessitates others in the room speaking the promises of God, means that faith is not an

280. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 252.

281. Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 254.

282. Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 255.

283. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 53.

individualistic venture with a distant God, but rather a highly communal venture with a God who longs to be in intimate loving conversation.

Promise and Justification by Grace through Faith

For Bayer, the topic of justification is closely linked to God's promise. Justification "unfolds" from God's promise: "The reformational teaching about justification is simply a more general unfolding of the specific teaching about *promissio* and the sacraments, understanding the faith in a distinctively literal way."²⁸⁴

God's word of promise of good news is spoken to a humanity which is defined by its own obsession with justifying itself. To hear the word of justification, and the assurance of salvation, has everything to do with language, with a spoken promise:

That which is decisively reformational is connected to the discovery of a meaning in the *iustitia Dei*, the righteousness of God. It cannot work apart from the mode and medium that God himself uses to distribute his righteousness by means of the trustworthy message of salvation of the promise of salvation: the *promissio* that constitutes the assurance of salvation.²⁸⁵

In other words, the human can only be justified through the medium of language, for this is the mode in which God pours out God's grace to the sinful human being.

Promise, Law and Gospel, and Jesus Christ

For Bayer the distinguishing between law and gospel is the primary way to differentiate God's various voices. In other words, it is crucial to distinguish between the commands of God and the promises of God. Commands are law, and promise is the gospel. Promise is that word which is liberating, freeing and justifying. Sequence is important here as well. Command or law is voiced first, and the second voice of God is that of promise. Bayer gives an example of God speaking law or command: "Adam! Eve! Where are you? (Gen. 3:9) Where is your brother? (Gen. 4:9)." Here the law discovers and also convicts. In law God confronts, being "against me."

284. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 55.

285. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 52.

In gospel God brings promises and is “for me.” But even when God speaks “against me” in law, it is spoken so that I might turn and listen to the promise.²⁸⁶ While God speaks in two voices, the second of the two, the promise, is strictly the gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s certain speech-act come near:

The second, decisive, final Word of God, the gospel, speaks on my behalf. The “for me” (*pro me*) in the reformational theology of Luther is that the nature of Jesus Christ himself is that of one who communicates with me, in which the triune God promises to me the Word made flesh, in baptism, and the Lord’s supper, as well as in every sermon that proclaims what is consistent with what happens in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In this kind of encounter, with the promise of the forgiveness of sins, the sinner becomes a new creation and continues to have a lasting identity that comes from outside the self, from another being, from one who is a stranger: from the one who is a wonderful transfer and exchange of human sin and divine righteousness has taken each person’s place.²⁸⁷

The promise is fully given in the blessed exchange, referred to as “a wonderful transfer” above. That which is ugly and damnable in the human is transferred to Christ, and Christ freely gives his righteousness and eternal life to the human.²⁸⁸

For Bayer, Jesus Christ is the guarantee or verification of all of the promises of God. Jesus Christ does not nullify the promises of the God of the Old Testament but rather verifies them.²⁸⁹ If God is a God of address, of speech, then Jesus is the one who addresses, speaks, converses humanity in a concrete way in his life, death and resurrection. Christ makes the promises of God more discernible, clearer, and more intimate. The image of Jacob fighting with the stranger at the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32) is a further metaphor of intimacy where Jesus and humanity meet:

When Christology is discussed, the following issues will be treated with greater specificity: who is next to whom, on account of whom, and in what medium; stated more explicitly yet: who comes to the other one and who is brought in to be with the other one.²⁹⁰

286. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 61.

287. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 61–62.

288. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 225–30.

289. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 154,222.

290. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 40.

To clarify, Bayer uses God's *promissio* in both a general and a specific sense. Bayer locates the *promissio* of God in a general way in those texts of scripture where God speaks a word of promise. God speaks the creation into being and creation serves as a gift to all of humanity. God grants freedom and limits in the orders or estates of the creation (church, family and economy, and the political order).²⁹¹ God promises God's self to his people: "I am the Lord your God." (Ex 20:2)²⁹² Bayer uses promise in this general way to say that God makes promises to and gifts all of humanity. In all of these cases, promise is indeed good news or gospel: God gives unconditionally.²⁹³

Further, Bayer uses promise in a very specific way when referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the mediator, the "true" promise, and verification of all of God's promises, yet intimately connected to those promises:

The most precise and pregnant term to designate this creative word is promise: *promissio*. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ, the word become flesh (John 1:14), is the bodily form and history through which God in the Holy Spirit mediates his promise, or more precisely, mediates himself as promise,—"I am the Lord, your God!" (Ex 20:2)—as *true* promise. His promise is *certain*; he delivers what he promises. "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, by me and Silas and Timothy," writes Paul (2 Cor 1:19, 20), "was not 'Yes' and 'No', but in him it has always been 'Yes.' For all God's promises are 'Yes' in him." The promise is bound up with the *name* by, in, and with which we can call on God: I am the one, the one who goes with you in freedom (Ex 3:14; defined more precisely in Ex 34:6).²⁹⁴

Bayer's weaving of God's promises of creation, peoplehood, and the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed by Paul to describe Christ as a specific kind of *promissio* is telling. Time and space are interweaved in the paragraph above with the promises of Exodus reverberating almost poetically with the "Yes" of Jesus Christ in the post-resurrection world, and then back to Exodus. It is hard to precisely describe how the *promissio* of Christ is different and yet connected to God's other promises when, for Bayer, again following Luther, the past, the present, and the future are conceived of at the same time. The interweaving of time is hard to describe but it can

291. Bayer, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," 120–53.

292. Bayer, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," 227.

293. Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 251.

294. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 230.

be poetically put, as Paul does in Romans 8:19-24²⁹⁵ and as Luther does in his hymn, “Through the Son, Our Lord.”²⁹⁶ This interweaving of time will be discussed further below in the section on eschatology.

Another way of sorting out these two uses of *promissio* will be treated in the section below on justification and sanctification. Creation, the orders of creation, and indeed all of life is created by God’s promise and are gifts to humanity. But not all promises, and not all gifts are salvific. When referring to the promise of Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection – the Spirit’s presence in the world, and the forgiveness of sins, *promissio* becomes a salvific word, although always connected to creation, and God’s ongoing gifts to all of humanity.²⁹⁷

Promise and Creation

Bayer notes that while creation has not been central in Lutheran theology, Luther himself makes many links between God’s promises, creation, and justification by grace through faith.²⁹⁸ Firstly, God commands light to exist, and light comes into being. God’s word does what it says. “Without the Word, the world would not exist.”²⁹⁹ Creation is a speech-act and a sheer unmerited gift in which God has poured out God’s entire self:

God did not reveal himself for the first time in the redemption of the world, but already in its creation and preservation; he poured himself out; he gave of himself completely; his almighty nature is one that humbles itself. Creation thus understood is gift and promise — both as establishment and as preservation of community, and in this sense it is a speech act!³⁰⁰

Bayer looks closely at Luther’s *Small Catechism* and notes the close connection between creation and justification. Justification is already mentioned in the article that deals with creation.

From the *Small Catechism*:

295. Oswald Bayer, “Poetological Theology: New Horizons for Systematic Theology,” trans. Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 2 (July 1999): 157–58.

296. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 214–24.

297. Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 253.

298. Bayer, “Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture,” 95.

299. Bayer, “Preaching the Word,” 251.

300. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 104.

For I believe that God has created me together with all creatures, has given me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all body parts, reason, and all senses and still preserves [them]; in addition, clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and child, fields, cattle and all goods, provides me richly and daily with all necessities and sustenance for this body and life, protects me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil – and all that because of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy without any merit and worthiness....³⁰¹

For Bayer, it is significant that the line “without any merit and worthiness” is used in this article on creation. Merit, justification, or justice language is so often invested in the future, referring to a time when the human, society, or nations will face judgement. But Luther places the language of merit and justification in the past – in creation:

Since Luther applies the concept and specific terminology about justification to the article about *creation*, it declares: it is more than simply that God no longer needs to offer a reward when he acts as judge. Instead, not owing a debt, for no reason, that is my origin and present life already.³⁰²

That God “created out of nothing” is an issue to be discussed not only under the title of creation but also of justification, for God created without any merit on the side of humanity. Justification is not “an addition” to humanity at its creation but essential to the source and destiny of humanity within creation.

For Bayer, seeing creation in the context of justification reveals that God’s *promissio* is sheer gift and scandal to humanity: “Every calculating *do ut des* (I give to you, so that you give to me) is annihilated”³⁰³ The unmerited gift of creation contradicts the human desire for creating oneself, for self-realization, and for acting so as to determine one’s worth. God justifies and God creates out of nothing for no reason but to give the gift of life. Both creation and justification are intimately connected and scandalous to a humanity who so often does not want to give or receive gifts unless they are merited.³⁰⁴

301. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 354, (Hereafter *BC*), in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 95.

302. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 96.

303. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 97.

304. Oswald Bayer, “I Believe That God Has Created Me with All That Exists: An Example of Catechetical-Systematics,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1994): 129–61.

As will be seen below under the topic of justification and sanctification, while creation is given for all to prosper, creation is all the more delightful when mediated by Christ. Christ raises the sinful human who is in curved into himself to an open stance where he can fully see and appreciate and delight in all of creation.

Promise and Ethics

When Bayer speaks about the western, modern, or postmodern world he notes that one of the greatest human sins, the sin that flies most obviously in the face of the gospel, is the development of totalizing schemes on rational and moral fronts. Here humanity takes life into its own hands, ignoring the creator and tries to find an underlying pattern to existence. The impulse to “totalize” – to make all of reality fit into a workable system – is all too common in western intellectual history. Ethical systems like Kant’s “categorical imperative” attempt to bring it all together with regard to morality. But in a comical twist, Bayer speaks of “categorical gift” rather than “categorical imperative” as a starting point for ethics.³⁰⁵

For Bayer the issue of Christian ethics is not “What shall we do?” but “What has been given to us?”³⁰⁶ The human, as Bayer contends, cannot start with the self or with humanity as such, but can only start with and proceed from the promises and gifts which God has given. Theological ethics begins with “I am your God, and therefore you are my people.” Promises such as this open up or free the human to true relationship to God, community, and the created world.³⁰⁷ As noted above, Bayer is clear that the human relationship with God, the God - human dialogue, does not exist in isolation from history, nature, physicality and culture. The relationship is *I, Thou, and It* – referring to the entire created order.³⁰⁸ As will be explored below, ethics for Bayer begins with the heard promises of God which have the effect of making straight the

305. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, 147.

306. Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 1.

307. Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 1.

308. Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 2.

incurred, self-justifying human so that she can be open to the other, community, creation, and God.

Bayer notes that there are two directions we can go with God's promises which leave them flat and ineffective. We commit the sin of totalizing if we do turn God's *promissio* into a final descriptive statement about God, or transcribe a specific promise of God in human works.³⁰⁹ For example, when listening to God's promise spoken by the angels, "Fear not", (Luke 2:10) the listener cannot conclude by making a descriptive statement to the effect that God only promises in this way. To say, "Finally we know that our God is a God who always speaks through angels to the lowest of society and that he always promises to alleviate fear," is a descriptive statement about God using only one instance, and functions as a way of limiting God's promise. God can and will speak many kinds of promises in many places and to many persons in many times. Theology can listen to those promises and make an account of the promises of God, but not of God per se. As Mark C. Mattes notes, "Bayer sees the gospel as a word of promise, not a description of the totality of reality."³¹⁰

Secondly, God's promises cannot simply be transcribed into human behaviour. The promise "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5) is God's promise to humanity and must stay as such. I cannot directly turn it into a moral program and say, "God promises not to leave us, therefore we ought to promise not to leave or forsake one another." While the personal moral impulse to stick by others might be worthy of pondering, it does not follow theologically that humans can make the kind of promises to each other that God can make to humans. In the same way, when Jesus performs a speech-act, such as the healing of a blind man with the words, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," (John 9:7) the Christian is not entitled to turn these words or this action into a moral directive. What Jesus does as recorded in John 9 is firstly a gift. Although Jesus' healing actions may spark conversation and even inspiration on how we

309. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 51.

310. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, 147.

might care for the blind or one another, the primary promise of the text is that God in Jesus came to the blind man to heal him. This healing is sheer gift – a gift to the blind man once healed and a gift to the reader who has the experience of Christ coming to her in the same way. Luther:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.³¹¹

Pausing and letting Christ do you some good with his *promissio* to you is not a moment for translating the promise into ethics. This moment is for the scandal of the gift, not for creating a scheme around which one can morally justify oneself.

For Bayer, everything points to God and to God's *promissio* not as an idea, or a statement, or a way to construct ethics, but as God's actual speech, as speech-act for the individual and the community who come to respond – to worship the God who addresses them first.

This introduction has served as a broad outline to what Bayer means by *promissio*. God is a God of promise who addresses humanity in concrete speech, or more properly in speech-act, for what God says, God does. The Word of God is effective. God longs to be in loving conversation with all of creation. God addresses humanity not in the abstract but in creation, in human community, in history and materiality where there is sound and friction. The one who comes from the outside is not distant but intimate in voice and sound. The scandal of God's gracious *promissio* is not simply a topic under justification, but one of creation as well, a novel linking these two subjects of theology. God's *promissio* is both general and specific, about creation and the church, but in a mysterious way. All of God's creatures are given lavish gifts and promises

311. Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Second ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 95.

from God, although not all are salvific. Jesus Christ is the verification, the bodily form of God's promised gifts. The church's ministry of the word, the table, and baptism are key places where the effective promises of God can be heard today, not for the sake of the church only, but also for the world. Bayer warns that *promissio* cannot be turned into another totalizing scheme. A given promise does not say everything about God, nor can the speech-act promises of God simply be turned into human moral practices.

Initial Observations on Bayer and Yoder

In this introductory section on Bayer's theology we can already make a number of observations in relation to previous chapters in this dissertation, especially the work of John Howard Yoder: 1) To use Meilaender's categories, Bayer's work stresses the favour or pardoning side of God's grace as opposed to the side of grace as ongoing empowerment or gift, where Yoder's stress lies. 2) Bayer speaks more of what God has done and is doing while Yoder speaks more of Jesus Christ and his role in human discipleship. God is one who fundamentally *speaks* an effective word, for Bayer. For Yoder, Jesus speaks and acts and his actions are highlighted not only as salvific but also as a model for discipleship. As we will see below, Bayer will not allow for such direct following of the acts of Jesus as a way to live the Christian life. It is the effective speech of Jesus – but indeed together with his actions – which take priority, but these acts are for the salvation of Christian, not for the purposes of observation for stronger discipleship. 3) For Bayer, God's speech to the individual and the effect of this speech is crucial. To be sure, both Bayer and Yoder are not "feel good" theologians. They are critical of subjectivity and the way that the therapeutic has triumphed in modern and post-modern expressions of faith; however, Bayer includes much more emphasis on personal faith as such, and is closer to Michael Gorman in this regard than to Yoder. At the same time that the personal is taken seriously, Bayer is not narrowly individualistic. The community is crucial for faith, as it is in community where we hear the other name God's promises. 4) Bayer's central concern of God's *promisso* in baptism, the

supper, and the word as sacrament are quite different than Yoder's more "pragmatic" and social understanding of the church. We will see Bayer place much stress on worship and what happens as God's promises are heard in community as it relates to all of life as well as to ethics. 5) Bayer has a theology of creation linked very closely to his theology of salvation. Yoder stays very much within the world of Jesus and discipleship, and does include the cosmos, but there is very little in Yoder about Christian appreciation of the beauty of creation. Yet one similarity which I note in this preliminary way is that both view the material world as the place of revelation. Bayer is interested in God's *promissio* which is heard in earthy ways; in voice, sound, and friction, and how this effective word of God allows the human to uncurve and live with openness and love in the world. Yoder is concerned about concrete lived life as well, and the ways in which Jesus's earthly life provides a witness to God's intention for the church in the world.

Promise and Ethics in Justification and Sanctification, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology

We already know that for Bayer justification is not "added" to humanity but is an essential element of humanity given in creation. God creates without merit and thus creation is a demonstration that what God promises, is done. If God has done it all and given all in God's *promissio* and gifts, what is required of the Christian? Does sanctification suggest that there can be growth in Christian devotion and action? On the topic of ecclesiology we can anticipate that the spoken promises of God in worship are key to salvation and to the ongoing moral life of the Christian. If Bayer sends the Christian back to church for worship when ethical issues arise, does that not create an "incurved" church – one that is unconcerned about the world? As for eschatology, we know that Bayer interweaves past, present and future. What is the Christian working toward, if not for a "better" future? These and other questions will be examined below as the connection between God's *promissio* and Christian ethics are looked at more closely.

Justification and Sanctification

Justification is central for Bayer and his way of putting justification together with sanctification is different than any of the previous scholars noted. As noted in the first chapter of

this study, James Dunn sees justification as one theme among others which Paul uses to preach the gospel. Bayer disagrees with this approach:

The theme of justification is not one theme among many. It has principle significance. It touches on every theme. Justification not merely one's own history, not only world history, but also natural history. It has to do with everything.³¹²

Again, with regard to the first chapter, Richard Hays' understanding was that some Lutheran theology can make sanctification subservient to justification, so the notion of growing in faith is left out. Bayer disagrees fundamentally with this way of connecting justification and sanctification. For Bayer justification and sanctification are not linked in the way that some scholars, and the Reformed tradition, have characterized the relationship.³¹³ Sanctification does not follow justification – with justification being the first, and salvific movement of God, and the sanctification, the growing into the new life of discipleship or holiness.³¹⁴ The relationship between justification and sanctification is more complex for Bayer.

For Bayer all that needs to be done and said is complete in the concept of justification. Bayer concludes that for Luther “justification by faith alone meant that everything was said and done; living faith is already the new life.”³¹⁵ For Bayer, following his reading of Luther, sanctification is a word which simply describes one aspect of justification. God's justifying work, as we shall see below, “opens” the human from their “incurved” state so that the holiness (sanctity) of God displayed in creation can be seen, enjoyed, and used. Sanctification is thus not a second movement of the Holy Spirit following justification but it is, one might say, what happens to the eyes of those who can now see. The justified, those in Christ, can now see what God has made holy for all: they can truly see the promises of God in all of creation.

Sanctification for Bayer “stresses the institutional side of the event of justification.”³¹⁶ In order to describe sanctification, Bayer turns to Luther's way of speaking about the holiness which

312. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, xii.

313. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 291.

314. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, xii, 58–59.

315. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 58.

316. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 59.

God has gifted to all of humanity in the form of the orders of creation and the two tables of the Decalogue.³¹⁷ God has made life “holy” through God’s own self giving which has gifted all of humanity with creation. But not all of God’s gifts are necessarily salvific. Creation and the three estates, or orders of creation, without the mediation of Christ, can be called holy but not salvific. Creation on its own, while a gift of God’s graciousness does not necessarily speak to humanity of salvation. However those who have been justified, those who have heard the promise of God and responded in faith, have had their eyes and ears opened so that they can see and hear God speaking through the created order.³¹⁸ The justified Christian is not curved in on the self but now ready to see and work with God’s sanctified creation and with other human beings in a thankful way. This is the simple way of saying it. We now look to Bayer’s way of configuring justification and sanctification and the relationship between them more closely.

Justification as State of Being

In his short work, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, Bayer begins by examining “justification” as an anthropological issue. One may expect a Lutheran theologian to start with how Christ has justified the sinner, but Bayer starts with the deeply lost self-justifying human. While the human is created and given the gift of creation without merit, the human is in a state of having to constantly justify himself. Justification is not a theme added to a discussion of the human condition; rather, the constant need to justify – to make a defense – on the individual, communal, and political level is a fundamental characteristic of humanity. Human is a “forensic” term: judging and being judged is an inescapable part of the fabric of human existence.³¹⁹

Humanity is called at every turn to justify its actions and existence. The theme of justification is not one theme among many but in this way embraces all of life.³²⁰ Questions of performance and existence are at the root of all human life and justification of human

317. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 59.

318. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 108.

319. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 4.

320. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 9.

performance and existence is required at every turn. At home, in the professional world, and with the neighbour, the individual faces a series of voiced or unvoiced questions which cannot be avoided: “We cannot reject the question that others put to us: Why have you done this? What were you thinking about? Might you not have done something else?”³²¹ The human, who longs for recognition from other humans, cannot escape the evaluation of either herself or the questions which come from other humans. In seeking recognition from the other, the human is thus always under judgement. The human lives inescapably in a nexus of justifications at home, in the work place, with the neighbour, and in political and intellectual realms. The need to be justified, to seek recognition in the competing world of questions of legitimacy and performance plays out in the social realm. Because we all want recognition from others, we are caught in the endless social game of self-justification: “There is no such thing as an autocratic individual, totally independent of the surrounding world and its recognition. The individual is always socially formed.”³²²

In the same way the individual human battles for recognition in the midst of peers, nations, societies, and historical movements also battle to be justified. Bayer characterizes world history as a battle for mutual recognition. Social groups, movements, political entities, and even historic epochs fight for a place in history, each movement attempting to assign guilt or blame, attempting to prove who is worthy and who is unworthy to be a part of collective world history. Who is included in the just? Who is unjust? Who has used power correctly? A just world cannot be pondered without justifications, and justice has been a major theme in world histories.³²³

Using examples from ancient Greece through to the present, Bayer notes that the intellectual history of the west is a history fraught with justification.³²⁴ Humans have attempted to justify movements, forms of justice, or of existence itself by way of rational or moral justifications. In the argument to justify this or that way of thinking, being or acting, the

321. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 1.

322. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 3.

323. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 4.

324. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 4–13.

philosopher attempts to “totalize” or to place all or as much of reality in view with the goal of overcoming human limitation. For instance, Immanuel Kant judges God and God’s justice “at the forum of reason” in an attempt to show that all religion has its basis in morality.³²⁵ Whether in the area of morality or metaphysics the Enlightenment posits that humans can, on their own, bring humanity “back to Eden” and thereby justify itself.³²⁶ At the bottom of justifications through reason or morality is “atheism,”³²⁷ a term which Bayer uses to describe totalizing rational and moral systems which not only fail to listen to or rely on God’s promise, but also falsely include God in their own justification game: even God is asked to justify God’s self!³²⁸ Western philosophy and theology, intellectual movements of various sorts, and even the pages of the Bible portray a humanity which will ask even God to justify God’s actions and being.³²⁹

While God’s creatures imagine themselves reaching to higher and higher levels of rationality and progress in thought and action through totalizing systems, from God’s vantage point the human is lost; incurved and atheistic. What appears to the human to be a stance of openness to all questions, morality, and thought is really a human who is “curved back in on himself” (*incurvatio in se ipsum*)³³⁰ where the beauty of creation, fellow humans and God cannot be seen or heard:

The human being who is made by nature to respond by looking outward, ends up entrapped now in the endless downward spiral of a circle, talking to himself ceaselessly and to those who are like him, and spends his time doing nothing but being completely absorbed in his own existence in an arrogant and hybrid way.³³¹

In the location where only justification after justification reigns, human senses are closed to the beauty of creation and to the gifts of God and needs of the neighbour. The law – here the

325. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 10; Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 70–78; Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 67.

326. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 15.

327. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 58.

328. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 55.

329. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 8.

330. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 183.

331. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 183.

law of unending justifications – under which humanity lives, is an enormous burden. Humanity is like Atlas of Greek mythology with the world on his shoulders.³³²

While Bayer critiques the turning of ethics into rational totalizing systems, as in the case of Immanuel Kant, he is not unconcerned about Christian morality. In fact, the incurved human being is amoral, or immoral, because she is so preoccupied that she does not see what needs to be done:

Sin is interruption, even a complete breakdown, of the comprehensive process of communication that starts with receiving and continues giving to others unconditionally, which is what humans were created to be. The original sin of unbelief thus brings with it ingratitude, greed, hoarding for oneself, not being willing to give anything to others.³³³

With no openness to receiving, the incurved human is living immorally or amorally. By implication, only by receiving the gifts of God's promises, to allow God to be God and to cease from self-justification, can the human be moral.

Justification and the Cry to “Be Opened”

What frees the human from this incurved nature? In short, only God can remove the nexus of self-justifications to which humans are bound. Only an unmerited gift from the outside can break the spiral of such justifications, of the constant striving for mutual recognition. Only God's promises can lift the human from the incurved state and allow him to stand straight.

Bayer makes a case for justification as the uncurving or opening up of the human in his analysis of Luther's sermon on Mark 7:31-37, preached on September 8, 1538.³³⁴ The sermon deals with deafness, blindness, and unbelief. Luther claims that the world is full of words: “The whole earth is full with speaking.”³³⁵ But at the same time humans are deaf: humanity is not listening to each other or to God. After meeting a man who is deaf and dumb, Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears and on his tongue and cries, “Ephphatha!” or “Be opened!” Instantly

332. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 18.

333. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 183.

334. Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe)*, 46:493–95, (Hereafter *WA*) in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 106–12.

335. *WA* 46:495, in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 107.

the man's ears are opened and he speaks plainly (Mark 7:34-35). In Luther's sermon, not only does Jesus cry out "be opened!", God's creatures cry out in the same way for humanity to listen rather than being deaf, to stand up rather than being incurved. All of creation cries for humanity to open up: "Sheep, cows, trees when they bloom say: 'Ephphatha'"³³⁶ Again, Bayer points out that Luther makes links between *promissio*, justification, and creation.

The "Ephphatha!" speech-act demonstrates that salvation transforms the one who is incurved to one who is now seeing and hearing, speaking and standing aright. The one who was incurved and shut out from loving communication is now standing upright so that he can see, hear, and converse with his community, the created world, and God. In God's effective promise to "be opened!" eyes, mouth, ears, hands, and hearts are open to apprehend the world which God gave as a gift to all.

What are the benefits of being opened, with regard to the nexus of self-justification? In this spacious place where the other, creation, and God can be heard and seen, the self is no longer engaged in self-worship. Ingratitude, covetousness, greed, and with it the game of justifying the self in the court of friends and society has ended.³³⁷ Indeed the priority and the seeking out of one's very identity is overcome, because identity is now not in the self but "in Christ:" "Being curved in on oneself and finding one's own ground of being, seeking to establish one's own identity, is now overcome."³³⁸

Justification and the "Happy Exchange"

Luther's discussion of the happy exchange in *Freedom of a Christian* is explored by Bayer as a way of further describing justification. Here Luther uses marriage as a metaphor for the union and the gift exchange between Christ and humanity. Luther describes a highly intimate event where Jesus, the one with no sin, no damnation, and only righteousness gives lavish gifts of

336. *WA* 46:495, in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 108.

337. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 110.

338. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 234.

grace and righteousness to the bride who can only offer death, sin, and hell in return. Christ and the bride exchange gifts making her into “a magnificent bride without spot or wrinkle.”³³⁹

Having gone through this experience, the human is open and need not worry about his or her identity: identity has been gifted by Christ and there is no longer need for self-justification:

With reference to this understanding of sin, what Jesus Christ’s work of salvation entails can be stated already: it is that communicative event by which the world that is curved in and distorted, because it is closed in on itself completely, is saved and thereby opened once again to be able to receive, praise, and once again give to others. The “happy exchange,” the exchange of gifts, is the successful communicative event between the sinning human being and the justifying God. God frees me from my self-imprisonment and opens for me communication with him and with fellow creatures once again.³⁴⁰

To be “in Christ” is to be living in another. Bayer grants that to find one’s identity outside of one’s self or to live outside the self and “in Christ” is almost inconceivable to the contemporary person. Nonetheless, this notion brings radical freedom. Living in Christ, I need not be concerned with myself. I am now looking outward and can look and live, speak and hear, and truly join in the riches of God’s world. In this intimate exchange the individual is transposed by an “alien righteousness,” a righteousness which is not entirely one’s own, so that one lives in another – in Christ: “The forgiveness of sins is not a conciliatory way to be raised up so as to achieve identity inside oneself. One’s identity is transposed into another, into one who always remains alien; into the alien righteousness that is given as a gift of Jesus Christ.”³⁴¹ Being in Christ means that the human admits that she is not her own and need not “work on” or “find her identity.” The obsession to “know thyself” is destroyed. The question is not, “who am I?” but “in whom do I live?”³⁴²

A Passive Faith

The one who receives such a gift from Christ is fundamentally a passive creature. *Theoria* and *praxis* as well as *contemplatio* and *actio* can easily collapse into attempts to prove one’s

339. *WA* 7:55 and *LW* 31:352 in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 226, 229.

340. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 184.

341. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 234.

342. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 24.

knowledge or one's work, or the connection between the two. Luther speaks of the human relationship to God as one of *vita passiva*.³⁴³ Bayer notes: "Faith is not knowledge and not action, neither metaphysical nor moral, neither *vita activa* nor *vita contemplativa*, but *vita passiva*."³⁴⁴ Passivity, Bayer argues, is different than mysticism because it does not try to progress in speculations or renunciations. Contemplation tends toward looking within the self, rather than to the outside for meaning and identity. Self-reflection defines the incurved life, not the life of those in Christ.³⁴⁵ But passivity in faith, Bayer argues, does not assume an inactive life of works. The one who takes the *vita passiva* is active in many ways. Having been opened, the Christian can see, hear, appreciate and be a servant to the neighbour. The Christian has received a gift and can spontaneously and with great joy pass that gift along. The gifts passed from Christ are not to be hoarded but can only be given to others.³⁴⁶ For Bayer this image of receiving and then passing along to the other is fundamental for understanding both God's *promissio* together with Christian action in the world:

Because it [faith] alone — and thus God alone, who establishes faith — breaks open the nature of the sinner as one curved in on himself; only he can loosen the fist that is clenched so tightly, so that my existence on behalf of others becomes natural once again and takes place with "passion and love." The imagery of receiving and passing on to others bring us to the foundational motif of Luther's understanding of God; that of categorical gift: through the Son, God in the Spirit gives himself to us as Father, in every sense of the word, so that we do not hoard and keep for ourselves what is given to us ... but instead we pass it on to others.³⁴⁷

In sum, the topic of justification by grace through faith in Christ for Bayer firstly deals with the nexus of self-justification to which humans are bound and then with the God who promises and delivers on "opening up" humanity from their incurved life of self-justification. The Christian now lives in a "spacious place"³⁴⁸ where identity is found, not in knowledge or in action but in faith, in God's *promisso*.

343. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 42.

344. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 43.

345. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 25.

346. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 283.

347. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 283.

348. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 32. Psalms 31:8: "You have set my feet in a spacious place."

While Bayer does not use the language of the powers and principalities, the nexus of self-justifications seems to be *the* power that holds humanity in bondage. The one justified by Christ needs no longer to play the game of justifications that are woven into the texture of all life but is now free. The human is saved, straightened up, and free – free to serve God and the neighbour.

Sanctification as the Other Side of Justification

For Bayer, sanctification is not a growing in faith as such – certainly not a growing or maturing in faith that can be recognized or monitored on this side of the grave. That there is no emphasis on progress however does not suggest that the Lutheran, as Emmanuel Swedenborg critically put it, walks forever in a circle in a dark room repeating, “I am justified by faith alone, I am justified by faith alone.”³⁴⁹ As Luther says in *The Freedom of the Christian*, we do “make some progress in that which will be perfected in the future life.”³⁵⁰ There is progress, although never final, to be made in the realm of the orders which have been created by God and thus made holy. But here too the emphasis is on God’s gifts and not on human action. The holiness of God and God’s gifts are granted in full in the promise as celebrated in baptism:

A Christian believer never develops beyond baptism, as long as he or she lives, no matter how much one has grown, no matter how much one has learned, and no matter what changes one has experienced. For in baptism one already has everything that comes with the name of God.³⁵¹

When reflecting on sanctification, Bayer does not keep his eye on the human, as though the human can be monitored for progress on moral fronts; rather, he keeps his focus on the God who continues to create and make promises for all of humanity. Sanctification, as a monitoring in how the Christian is growing, has Christians doing too much self-reflection.³⁵² Self-reflection on progress is not in keeping with the one who is now open and standing straight. The “process of sanctification cannot be assigned grades. Believing means that one is removed from being in

349. Oswald Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 273.

350. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 65.

351. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 268.

352. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 291.

charge of oneself and responsible for one's own judgement."³⁵³ The Christian becomes incurred again when the focus is on monitoring the self: "The sanctified individual as such does not deserve recognition; one should take note of God, who sanctifies and who uses his Word as the means of sanctification."³⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the topic of sanctification provides directions for human responsibility, not only for Christians, but for all of humanity.

Sanctification and the Orders of Creation

Central for Bayer on the topic of sanctification are the three estates or orders of creation as discussed in Luther's commentary on Genesis. The first order is that of the church which has to do with the relationship between God and humanity. The second order or estate is that of family or economy. This is the order of domestic life and the work-a-day world. The third order is the political realm, placed by God after the fall. This order serves to restrain chaos and violence.³⁵⁵ The three orders are, as aspects of creation itself, gifts given to humanity without merit. As God's gifts to humanity, they are thereby holy. God does not keep holiness to God's self but rather gives it away in creation. However, while these orders are holy and given by God, they are not thereby salvific. As Luther says, "in them we may either be lost or we may find deliverance — by faith alone."³⁵⁶

While sin has corrupted the estates, they remain locations where God's goodness, love and holiness can be experienced. The basic estate, that of the church, is where God addresses with promise and longs for thankful response.³⁵⁷ Here the church is understood in a different sense than the Christian church is often understood. The church as an estate or order is the arena in which communication between all of humanity and God is considered and occurs. God speaks promises through creation seeking a response from humans. Some respond positively and some

353. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 291.

354. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 293.

355. *LW* 1:104-118. See also *LW* 54:446.

356. *LW* 37:365 in Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 62.

357. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 61.

do not. In this estate even those who do not respond are still responding by turning their backs to God. Even those who refuse to praise God, are making a response to God, and thus in communication with God. The church as an order of creation includes responses of unbelief, belief, praise and lament.³⁵⁸

The estate of the household and economy is where family and children, husbands and wives, land and the reality of making a living are ordered.³⁵⁹ Here children, work, and the care of animals is seen as both gift and responsibility.

The political realm, Luther concedes, was created as an “emergency ordinance” in the face of the great violence at the heart of humanity. Methods of compulsion are used here to keep basic order in nations. The estates of the church and the household at times must use compulsion as well.³⁶⁰

Connected to the broad responsibilities which all humans have with regard to the three estates, Luther looks to the “two tables” of the Decalogue for wisdom on God’s sanctification of human community. In his *Small Catechism* Luther speaks about commandments one through four (the first table) as specifically for Christians, and the remaining six (the second table) for all of humanity. Having no other God, not making an idol, not misusing the name of God, and keeping the Sabbath are commandments spoken to those in Christ. Honoring father and mother, and the prohibition against murder, adultery, false testimony, and coveting are gifts/commands for all of humanity.

The Holy Spirit is working through both tables, but in different ways.³⁶¹ God is working in the church of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to call and continually preserve the faithful. Bayer writes of the Holy Spirit in connection to the sanctification of the Christian using Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church* (1539):

358. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 61.

359. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 61.

360. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 63.

361. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 59.

The Holy Spirit “does not [work] only” through a call that just comes once but “through sin being swept out each day and through the [daily] renewal of life, [so] that we do not remain in sin, but can and ought to lead a new life in all manner of good works and not in the old, evil works.”³⁶²

While sanctification does not mean progress in the Christian life, the Holy Spirit is surely in the church “preserving ” and “renewing.”

God works through the Holy Spirit in the estates to give life, vitality, and protection for all. Bayer notes that keeping the estates in mind has a “correcting” function for those justified in Christ. The word of promise in worship is not the only place where God is working in the world. God is working in various ways to make holy all realms of life. Further, that God works to preserve community in the home, economic relations, and in the political realm suggests that God’s work and promise is not be taken in individualistic terms but also social and even cosmic terms.³⁶³

Justification/Sanctification and Ethics: Walking the Mountain Ridge

Bayer integrates justification and sanctification by noting how the latter is the institutional side of the former. The Holy Spirit works both in the church and in the world but in different ways. Those who are forgiven are standing straight and open to converse and interact with God, the neighbour, and the created world. They cannot help but pass on the gifts given to them by Christ. The Holy Spirit works in the world through the estates of family-economy and the political arena, where limits are set and sometimes coerced, so that life can be enjoyed. Here all people have been both gifted and given broad responsibility.

But what happens when the Christian, who is now free to serve, faces a contradiction to the faith in the estate of politics? It is fine and good to say that the Christian is free to help the neighbour – to spontaneously pass along the gift of forgiveness that has been granted by Christ. But what happens when the Christian finds himself in a place of political power and must make

362. *LW* 41:144 in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 244.

363. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 58, 62.

decisions that may not be in keeping with that love and forgiveness which is passed on in Christ? Can a Christian be a soldier? Can a Christian be a hangman?

Bayer provides an answer to this ethical quandary by turning to two of Luther's arguments; one negative and one positive. The negative argument is that separatism from the world is not a response to any ethical dilemma. Luther did not agree with the monastic orders, nor with the Anabaptists or enthusiasts who, in his mind, cloistered themselves away from such worldly activities and questions. The way to treat such issues is not by separating from the world. Luther did not buy the Roman Catholic argument that there ought to be two kinds of Christians with two tiers of responsibility. As it was, those who live in prayer, away from the world and can live by the Sermon on the Mount, and those Christians in the world are granted some latitude. Luther saw that the "wandering" separatist life of the New Testament, especially of Jesus and his disciples, was not meant to serve as an actual pattern for daily Christian life. The scriptures also tell the stories of the faithful who had "settled" lives; those who live, move and have their being in the context of family, work, commerce and politics. Escaping the world for the confines of the church is not an option. The unbound Christian does not face inward but faces the world and lives in and for the world.³⁶⁴

If separatism is not an option, what shall the "settled" Christian do? For Luther, as for Bayer, sometimes the ethical issues can be solved quickly. If the choice is clearly between the state and the faith, one clearly chooses the faith, even if there are dire consequences. If the state especially wants the Christian to make a decision between serving the state and serving Christ, one always chooses Christ.³⁶⁵ However, Bayer agrees with Luther that most ethical dilemmas are more difficult and complex. Luther himself struggles with these issues in *State and Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed* (1523).³⁶⁶

364. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 285.

365. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 302, 304.

366. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 316.

Bayer notes that ethical dilemmas are like traversing a mountain ridge. Whatever the decision that is made, grace is needed for the self and in judging other Christians as well as those do not call themselves Christians. Recall that for Bayer, we do not know ourselves and the outcome of our actions as well as we think we do. Also, as will be seen below, one never knows what the future holds, for it is in God's hands. As will be seen in the next section, the moral life of the Christian is worked out in the church where the promises of God are spoken and enacted in the word, at the table, and in baptism.

Ecclesiology

For Bayer, the general and specific word of God's *promissio* is heard most clearly in the church at worship. The centrality of hearing God's word of promise comes back to the church in worship where the sermon, baptism and the table "speak" and enact God's promises. The one who asks ethical questions will be directed by Bayer to God and God's promise as proclaimed in preaching, baptism, and table. That the worship of the church is so central does not turn the church inward as an escape from the world. Rather, those very sacraments celebrated in the church make the church outward looking so that it can be active and involved in the world. In this section we look to the centrality of the word of promise for the church, the marks of the church, and the church that faces outward.

The Word and the Church

At the heart of Bayer's theology of the church is Luther's "*Ubi est Verbum, ibi est ecclesia*," (Where the Word is, there is the church").³⁶⁷ The church is envisioned as that body which exists within earshot of the word of promise. The word which is spoken in the church comes primarily in preaching, the table, and baptism and also in other derivative forms, which are less clearly of the Spirit, and which will be described below.

³⁶⁷. *WA* 39 II 176 in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 255.

For Bayer, article Five of the *Augsburg Confession* is central to the entire confession in that the Holy Spirit is mentioned here as the one who establishes the church through the Word.³⁶⁸ Here again, God is giving a lavish gift through no human merit. Article Five also points back to justification in Article Four and sets the stage for Articles Seven and Eight which handle ecclesiastical issues related to law and gospel. Reflection on the Christian faith and the church centres around what God is doing in God's efficacious Word:

Everything that makes the church the church is contained in the "Word": the *preaching* of the gospel, its visible and tangible form in the *sacrament*, and the *Holy Spirit* by the gospel, whose office is to sanctify. The Holy Spirit who is given in the Word is the one who makes the human being into a Christian and makes the gathering of Christians into the church.³⁶⁹

For Bayer, as for Luther, all else in the church unfolds from the Word and the Holy Spirit given in the Word. The Word which created the church is heard anew in the church not only through preaching and scripture, but also in baptism and at the Lord's table as well as in other "marks" of the church, which will be described below. According to a literal understanding of Bayer's theology of promise, the "church" exists only where the *promissio* is the basic text of the sermon."³⁷⁰ Here the definition of the church is tied to event more than to institution: the event of God's speaking and human listening.

The Church, constituted as it is by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, is not the Roman Catholic "institution for salvation" that expresses "spiritual dignity," nor is it a society that simply gathers as persons are converted and seek friendship and support.³⁷¹ To put it another way, the church is not defined primarily by its institutional walls (Roman Catholic), but nor is it a gathering of those moving forward to some Platonic ideal (Anabaptists/Enthusiasts). The church is made of up saints/sinners who have been called and who have gathered to hear again the promises of God.³⁷² Again, for Bayer, the event of hearing God's promises in the gathered

368. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 255.

369. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 257.

370. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 55.

371. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 245.

372. Helmer, "The Subject of Theology in the Thought of Oswald Bayer," 26.

community is the primary way to understand the church. Of course the church is on-going and not only defined by “moments.” Luther’s church has a structure and hierarchy ensuring that the word in all its forms can continue to be heard. However, the structure and hierarchy are not ends in and of themselves but are there to support and continue those places where Christians gather to hear God’s *promissio* and to return praise to God.

The Holy Spirit calls and constitutes the church in the same way that individuals are called and constituted. The individual is “called,” and the church is “gathered,” but both are the result of the same word of promise uttered by the Spirit via the voice of another human.³⁷³ What is more, no one can be a Christian on their own. The church is not a mere addendum to the life of the individual Christian but is integral from the outset. Although there is a clear “I” who is being called, the “I” is always called in the midst of community and called by the Spirit through the voice of another – in a “physical way” as noted above. Bayer comments on lines from the “Apostles’ Creed” found in the *Small Catechism*:

“The Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel” — me individually, but not in an isolated sense but rather a “me in the midst of the whole Christian church on earth” ... Just as a person needs in life those who are fellow creatures — above all one’s parents — and cannot live alone, so the believer cannot live alone either. Though it is true that the believer has direct access to God, and does not need the holder of an office such as a priest or pope to be the go-between any longer, it is also true that the faith does not come into existence apart from its being transmitted in a historical, physical way, nor apart from a mother or father in the faith, and it cannot survive without being embedded in the congregation that prays on behalf of others. The Word precedes the faith. In this sense Luther can speak of the church as “mother.”³⁷⁴

The person is addressed by the promise but is always addressed in community: she hears the Word in a “physical way” through the voice of the other. The brothers and sisters in the church are not a bonus to my faith but crucial in that I can only hear the sure word of promise, of assurance through them. Bayer comments on the communal nature of the faith by referring to Luther’s comments on Mark 2. Jesus has healed a man who had to be carried by his friends.

373. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 244.

374. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 245.

Jesus healed him when he saw “their” faith, that is, the faith of the friends carrying the man.³⁷⁵

Bayer claims that “faith always comes to me through other people who stand in on my behalf and make intercession.”³⁷⁶ The Holy Spirit not only saves, but gathers, and can only do her saving work in that very gathering.

Marks of the Church (*Notae Ecclesiae*)

Article Seven of *Augsburg Confession* stresses that unity of the church is ensured by keeping the gospel Word at centre in the church through preaching, baptism, and the supper. These three “marks of the church,” which simply “unfold” from the Word, form the foundation of the church, and are the signs by which the church can be identified.³⁷⁷ The Holy Spirit is not an additive in the signs of the church but “at work within them.”³⁷⁸ The primary work of the church is to gather and hear together the *promissio* in these three primary forms – in words, in water, and in taste:

These three — preaching the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s supper — are the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*); since baptism and the Lord’s Supper are nothing other than particular forms of preaching the gospel, all three together form the one and only, foundational and nonnegotiable characteristics of the church: characteristics of recognition and, at the same time, characteristics of its nature.³⁷⁹

While these three marks of the church are primary, there are other marks of the church as listed in Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church* (1539)³⁸⁰ and *Against Hans Wurst* (1541).³⁸¹ Here confession and absolution, the pastoral office, prayer and praise of God, marriage, and suffering on account of the gospel, are listed as “marks of the church” along with preaching, the table, and baptism. According to Bayer these other marks grow from the first three but are subordinate to them. The further one goes down Luther’s lists of the marks of the church, the less

375. *LW* 36:73-4 in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 267.

376. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 267.

377. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260.

378. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 263.

379. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260.

380. *LW* 41:143-78 in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260.

381. *LW* 41:185-256 in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260.

clear and reliable are they marks of the church – as locations where we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is working.³⁸² For instance, suffering is not as clear a mark of the church as the Lord’s Supper, for anyone can suffer and for a number of reasons.³⁸³ Suffering *may* be a mark of the church, but this requires discernment. Discernment though is a vexing problem, because “even for the justified, there is ambiguity in action and in observation.”³⁸⁴ But there is no ambiguity, for instance, in the Lord’s supper. Here the word of promise is clear and effective as attested in scripture. Nonetheless, that the first three marks are related to others demonstrates that the Word penetrates every aspect of the life of the Christian, the congregation, and the world.³⁸⁵ What is crucial here is that the church purposely connects that which is certain with that which is more ambiguous. For instance, the building up of marriages in the church could be connected and draw its life from the supper. This way the lesser marks of the church can serve as signs of the Holy Spirit at work in the church.

Beyond the significant and lesser marks of the church, Luther also notes that a mark of church can be a specific ethic related to the second table of the ten commandments. In other words, a church might be known for its honesty in all relations. The fact that in that given church people do not bear false witness, and can be trusted, might be taken as a mark of the church – a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit.³⁸⁶ But marks such as these are, again, ambiguous. Indeed many people are honest so one cannot categorically say, “where there is honesty, there is the church.” A negative example can also serve. Perhaps a given church is known for its neglect of one of the ten commandments. A church may be known for the many people who gather there who are committing adultery. This of course is a negative story for this church, but it cannot be said that simply because one church is known in this way that this is a mark of the church. The

382. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260.

383. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 261.

384. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 263.

385. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 262.

386. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 262.

ethical lives of the parishioners is not necessarily a mark of the church, nor an indication of the God whose promises are spoken in the church.

Bayer, following Luther, claims that the justified are those who are both sinner and saint at the same time. This goes for the church as well. Even the justified are sinners. But more so, it is never entirely clear if all people in the church are truly justified. As Bayer notes, there is a holy Christian church, but “where its borders are to be found and who belongs to her in individual cases cannot be described perfectly according to human decision.”³⁸⁷ Given the limitations of human perception and judgment what one sees in a church is not always reliable. Indeed it is good for a church body to display good moral behaviour, but it does not follow that the behaviour of those in the church should be seen as a direct reflection of who God is, or what the faith is about.³⁸⁸

In relation to the contemporary church, Bayer is dismayed that the three marks of the church – sermon, supper, and baptism – have been replaced by more practical and “justifiable” marks. The church is defining itself not by the practices whereby it hears God but rather by those practices which the western world prizes.³⁸⁹ The church is known primarily by its soup kitchens and its involvement in local or global justice and peace issues. In Bayer’s words, the church is caught up in the nexus of self-justifications in which all are entrapped, and is attempting to prove its right to exist in the world of competing justifications and mutual recognition. Bayer notes that many churches are living under a new “law,” a new “categorical imperative ... our duty toward peace and justice.”³⁹⁰ How to bring peace in this world has become the new bondage or the new Atlas under which all are forced to judge themselves and others. The church, though, like the justified person, must leave preoccupation with identity and image and return to the reliable word of promise. Bayer would likely admit that indeed it is good for a church to be active in the

387. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 281.

388. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 278.

389. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 263.

390. Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” 285.

community, and to be opposed to those who propagate violence, but the marks of the church are not to be characterized by those activities in isolation from its table, its baptismal water, and its word. To work for peace and justice is always to work in an arena of ambiguity, though surely many are called to this work. Again the stress for Bayer is on the church's identity "in Christ" and its gathering around the sure promise in the Word, preaching, and baptism. Connecting these words of promise to the church's work for peace, for instance, is crucial.

In all questions of morality and ethics, Bayer will answer by pointing the church to gather around God's efficacious word in preaching, the table, and baptism. Here Bayer contends that the sure way to live a life of discipleship is to return to baptism:

Baptism is the intersection of the old world and the new. Ethical progress is only possible by returning to Baptism. That progress which will promise us good things, and not just things, but the very best, is a converting and returning to Baptism, and therefore to a new perception of the world in which we no longer choose between optimism and pessimism, between shrill anxiety about the future and euphoric hope regarding the further evolution of the cosmos and the enhancement of possibilities; all the same it remains true that God the Creator unceasingly does new things.³⁹¹

In other words, the most critical thing to ponder when thinking about Christian ethics is to keep baptism, preaching, and the table central to the life of the church. Doxology is the central place for ethical empowerment. The outreach of the church, be it in local or larger forums, will follow from these central marks of the church, rather than replace them.

The Church Turned to the World

Just as the Christian has been straightened up from her incurved self and is standing straight so that the world, other persons, and God are seen with clearer vision, so is the church standing strait with open eyes to the world and its creator. While the church centres around practices such as preaching and baptism, where God speaks effective promises, the church is not self-centred, not incurved in on itself. The marks of the church define and characterize the church, but they also are the location where the Spirit works to prompt and empower the church

391. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 66.

to face the world. The supper, for instance, in offering joy and thanksgiving, allows the church to turn to their “fellow creatures with distinctive courage.”³⁹²

The church, like the individual Christian, is passive in faith, but active in the world and the estates which God has created. As noted above, Luther critiqued the two-tiered system where some were called to more pure lives away from the world and some were called to be more involved in the world. “Discipleship,” Bayer notes in connection with dealing with ambiguity in ethical decisions, “takes place in the world’s house; if it is taken out of this house, it becomes enthusiastic and monkish.”³⁹³ The gifts spoken about, celebrated, and made effective through Christ in worship allow the person to face outward. The church, just as the individual, does not live in and for itself, but lives in and for Christ with its face turned to the world.

While church faces outward, and is in service to the neighbour and to the world, Bayer is critical of “enthusiasts” and “activists” inside and outside of the church. While the church is active in the world, Bayer does not picture an “activist church.” Activism or enthusiasm, although not clearly developed in one place by Bayer, are movements which pretend to know and claim too much. The activist seems to ask, “What shall we do?” before asking “What has been given?” and is thus not open to the gifts of God’s promise in creation and in Christ as empowerment for moral action. Secondly, the activists Bayer has in mind are those who totalize or make one issue into a principal which overrides all. Even “love” can be a principle which can shut off Christians from other perspectives and from the promise of God: “Turning love into a principle turns it a form of enthusiasm, which impatiently does away with the difference between faith and seeing ...”³⁹⁴ Finally, the activist is one who is going beyond what is “at hand” – going beyond immediate need of the neighbour. Rather than loving the neighbor in simple and spontaneous ways, the activist is attempting, under a perceived “certain principle” to control history or to build the kingdom. As will be developed below when I look to eschatology, the

392. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 72.

393. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 307.

394. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 208.

Christian is called to love and give the self for the sake of others, but does not work under “metaphysical pressure.” Christians do not work under the assumption that they are to make history turn out right. This is God’s task.

In sum, the church is that group which is gathered by and for the sake of the *promissio* of God. Centred around the word of promise in preaching, baptism, and table, the church hears again the effective promises of the gospel. Encouraged and empowered by the Word, the church faces the world and is fully engaged in the world. Still, the church is a saint/sinner reality. At times the church truly witnesses to God and at times it must share the same kinds of confessions that all who are outside the church should confess. The church is not activist as such but does what is “at hand.” The church refrains from trying to control history by its own actions because it knows that God’s promise, and not human work as such, will determine history.

Eschatology

Much of Bayer’s eschatology has been hinted at above. Here we look more specifically to his views on progress, the interweaving of time, the cross, and the eschatological nature of worship.

Progress

For Bayer, eschatology, whether viewed under contemporary religious or secular banners erroneously bespeaks progression. Whether it be in the form of Pietism or Marxism, the modern and post-modern world has understood history as a progressing through time, leading up to a day when a better world will be constructed through economics, politics, and religious institutions. Here the church and society see themselves progressing through time, actually getting better and “building” toward some vision of the Kingdom.³⁹⁵ Bayer notes that Luther has something quite different in mind with regard to progress in history, which includes both creation and the apocalyptic:

395. Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 291.

Luther's apocalyptic understanding of creation and history opposes the perspective of a philosophy of history that has emerged in modernity; it opposes, above all, the modern idea of progress. In hindering the theme of modern progress, Luther's understanding does not imply that the justified human person moves around in a circle and cannot walk with firm steps in a specific direction. The contrary is correct. In fact, progress is made in the relation between the new and the old person.³⁹⁶

Again Bayer places the emphasis on God and not humanity. If you are looking for progress, look at how God is changing lives. Progress is not in human hands but in God's hands.

Does this mean that there is not progress in history at all, no progress in my moral life?

Bayer admits that there is progress but it is hard to discern, and the temptation is always to find a pattern to progress and link it to salvation:

Progress is, to be sure, made in the ethical sphere, in the area of works, in our actions, in our political involvement. But it is not absolute progress. It is ethical progress without metaphysical pressure. We do not merit the kingdom of God by working for it. It has long since been prepared. The concept of progress is no longer a salvation concept. It loses the religious fascination that it has as a perverted salvation concept. It also loses its fanaticism in the area of politics. As ethical progress, progress divorced from the question of salvation is really secular progress. It is never absolute and total. Instead, it takes place in small but definite steps.³⁹⁷

That the Christian works without "metaphysical pressure" means that there is no pressure to make history turn out right: the Kingdom is already prepared. The Christian never tries to "master and control the future."³⁹⁸ Christian actions are not done in reference to what will make history turn out right, but rather are done in a more neighbourly and spontaneous way in light of what or who is "at hand." In Christ Christians are released from the pressure of having a unifying theory of history and of making history turn out right, which spells new freedom for loving the neighbour.

The Interweaving of Time

Key to Bayer's view of history, and to this release of metaphysical pressure for the Christian, is a specific way of viewing past, present, and future. Time does not progress in a

396. Bayer, "Rupture of Times," 43.

397. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 65–66.

398. Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 66.

linear way; rather, time is interweaved or intermingled in a way that most humans have a hard time comprehending. With regard to Christian action in the world, there is no need for Christians to make history turn out right because God's consummation is as much in the future as it is in the present and the past:

The crucial point of Luther's understanding of time consists of the folding into one another of pivotal events in time, it consists in an interweaving of times (*Verschrankung der Zeiten*). The last judgment, the consummation of the world, and the creation of the world are perceived simultaneously. The future of the world comes from God's present and presence. God's new creation establishes the old world as old and restores the original world. Salvation communicated in the present is seen in view of Christ on the cross. The salvation effected on the cross guarantees the coming consummation of the world. In between the times, the suffering and groaning of the creatures of the old world are experienced in painful contradiction to the creation originally created by the promise.³⁹⁹

If one is looking for the centre of history, one should look to the cross. For Bayer the cross puts all of history into perspective, and indeed puts history aright once and for all.

The Cross of Jesus Christ

For Bayer, the focus on time is not about what humanity can do for itself, especially with regard to progress and the justification to show progress to fellow humans, but rather in what God has already done in the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ ends the need to justify, making a new created order where the "meat grinder" of progress is shattered:

This history of the world is marked by the war of all against all. All fight to live or die in the struggles for mutual recognition. Into this meat grinder, God has given himself through his Son. Laying down his life, God has emptied himself unto death, to death on the cross. God is man. He is among us, "with us in mud and in work, so that his skin smokes." Describing "God with us" in earthy pictures, Luther preaches on the name of Christ as "Immanuel." By virtue of his love, the crucified God endures and overcomes the night of sin, of death, and of hell..⁴⁰⁰

The overcoming of the meat grinder of mutual recognition and of justifications, is accomplished by God in Christ. From the viewpoint of faith, time is thus defined not by human action, by ruptures or "great moments" in the history of human ventures, but by the new creation which God has given in the cross of Christ.

399. Bayer, "Rupture of Times," 45.

400. Bayer, "Rupture of Times," 40–41.

The cross of Jesus Christ marks the site of the rupture. It is the rupture between the old world that has come to its end and the renewed creation, between the fallen creation and the new world that is so new that it will not become old anymore; it is eternally new. True newness is ascribed to this time alone; it is the newness of the present and the presence of the Spirit.⁴⁰¹

It is in the “newness of the present and presence of the Spirit” which life is now lived: Relieved of establishing theoretical coherence and practical continuity, I am freed from the coercion to pronounce a final judgment on myself and on others or to think the history of the world in terms of my ultimate judgment of the world.⁴⁰²

Word, Table, and Baptism

But life in the Spirit and this freedom is not all roses. As noted above, there is the agony of living “in between the times.” The temptation in this agony is to call for a unifying theory, such as progress, so that the church can get through this time. Bayer calls rather for listening to the promises of God in creation, cross, and consummation – all of which “speak” to the believer who lives in the present. Where does one hear these promises? One hears them at the table, in baptism, and in the words that accompany such devotion to God. There is “progress” but it is that progress which God has made, is making, and will make, as named and performed in baptism:

Modernity has forgotten about the distinction between ethical progress and a metaphysical progress. This kind of forgetting includes a forgetting of the meaning of baptism. Baptism is the place of rupture between the old and the new world, between the old and the new eon. There can only be ethical development in the return to baptism. The progress from which we can expect what is truly good, and not only the good but the best of all, is accessible only in the turn and return to baptism. Together with the return to baptism is a turn towards a perception of the world in which the alternatives between optimism and pessimism, between a glaring fear of the future and a euphoric hope of the further evolution of the cosmos including an intensification of its possibilities, are shattered as truly as God the Creator works newness without ceasing.⁴⁰³

This turn to baptism does not place the Christian in a cloister, so as to escape the world. Rather

401. Bayer, “Rupture of Times,” 36.

402. Bayer, “Rupture of Times,” 44.

403. Bayer, “Rupture of Times,” 43–44.

the world and its agony is opened up and clearly seen. The supper also opens the Christian to the world:

God's promise is given to be heard and to be tasted in an extremely concentrated way in the Lord's Supper. The Lord of the Supper is Christ crucified. He has "tasted death" (Heb. 2:9). He tells the story of death and, as the one now living, he speaks the last Word by virtue of his sacrificial death. From the center of life as it is perceived in the communal supper, suffering, and death are not excluded. They are included in the daily bread. The center, the gift-word of the supper, in which God gives himself to us completely, as God does in every other sermon, arouses the "Eucharist": thanksgiving and joy. From this thanksgiving emerges the new turning towards one's fellow creatures in a peculiar courage to face life.⁴⁰⁴

For Bayer, the interweaving of the time means positively that history is in God's hands. Does this mean that Christians are to do nothing and simply laze about? No: Christians are pressed to hear the promises of God proclaimed in the company of the gathered congregation. In the sacraments the Christian hears and tastes the promise once again. Having heard this promise, the Christian faces the world with new courage. Having again been uncurved or reminded of that uncurving, the Christian is free to see and to pass a gift of love to the neighbour. Working hard and joyously in life, be it in the family or the local community, is encouraged and given empowerment through the constant return to the table, the preached word, and baptism, which for Bayer, make up the one place where God's promises are clearly heard.

Bayer and Yoder: Notes on Moving Grace to the Centre of the Sermon

Here I will attempt to constructively bring Oswald Bayer together with John Howard Yoder as I continue to develop what it might mean to move God's grace to the centre of the sermon.

1) Moving grace to the centre of the sermon may mean reexamining the role of the relationship between, and meanings of, justification and sanctification. Both Bayer and Yoder reject the notion that justification and sanctification are joined in such a way that one proceeds the other – justification being the first and pardoning act, with sanctification having to do with

404. Bayer, "Rupture of Times," 46.

on-going growth through the Spirit. Yoder reduces both justification and sanctification to God's work of reconciliation. Humans are reconciled to God in Christ and then reconciliation becomes the work of the Christian in the church and in the world through the power of the Spirit. Bayer takes an entirely different route. In the life of the Christian, both in the beginning, and in an on-going sense, "justification" says it all. What is done is baptism – where God's effective promise is made– is complete in that moment. All that is needed is there in the speech-act. The on-going nature of the Christian life has to do with the Christian returning to baptism in the word and at the table, so that the promise can be continually heard. Sanctification has to do not with humanity but with God's (holy) provision of the orders of creation, and those gifts of order which God has given in the ten commandments. God has made all of life holy for all of humanity, but not necessarily salvific. The connection between justification and sanctification is made when the human is uncurved with the promise (justification) and now can see truly that God has made a beautiful world (sanctification). God can speak to the Christian through creation now! The human, now standing up-right with eyes open can see the created order, including the earth and its creatures, as well as fellow humans aright.

2) Moving grace to the centre of the sermon may mean speaking about the grace of God which dwells not only in the church and in the realm of salvation, but also in the world – where God has lavished God's gifts of creation and order for all of humanity. Bayer's understanding of sanctification in this manner brings up another difference between him and Yoder. Yoder's thought is more narrowly focused on what happens in the church and through Christians who are active in the world. With his anti-Constantinian stance, as well as his overall negative view of the powers and principalities (even though he admits they were created for good), there is little in the world to appreciate. Yoder makes fewer, if any, vital connections between what God is doing in Jesus Christ and what God is doing in creation. Creation, beauty, order in society – where God acts outside of the realm of the church – get little emphasis from Yoder. Bayer, however, is keenly interested in making more and vital connections to the God who works outside of the

church in creation and human relations, as well as inside the church in matters of salvation. It appears sometimes in Yoder – although he is clear that making history turn out right is not the goal of Christian ethics – that God only works within the “world” when Christians can go there and do or demonstrate that God is a reconciling God. For Yoder, there is more of a sense that God speaks within and works through the church. For Bayer, God speaks effective promises to the church and to the world, but in different ways.

3) Moving grace to the centre of the sermon may include rethinking how God works in the church. Bayer gives us a more full-blown development of the church’s sacraments and how God speaks and acts in and through them. For Bayer it is clear that God is giving these gifts to those who gather for the word, for baptism, and for the table. For Yoder it is not clear what God is doing because many of the practices which Yoder points to are actions of human interaction and not interactions which include a word from God. There is not a denial here that God does not work in the practices which Yoder mentions, but the way in which God acts is not clearly developed. It is also not clear in Yoder’s story of these practices that the Spirit is doing anything in those practices beyond good social process. For Bayer, it is clear that the church centres on those practices, those sacraments, where God clearly speaks and where Christians respond and receive those effective promises. It could be that a given church starts a conflict mediation ministry in their community. What would be crucial for Bayer here is that the conflict mediation ministry that the church operates is closely linked to the sacraments of the church. Those involved in the mediation centre must be constantly fed at the table and by the word. The individual in the church and the church itself finds its life in the sacraments – in God’s effective and empowering speech.

4) Moving grace to the centre of the sermon clarifies that God, and not humanity, will make history turn out right. Here Yoder and Bayer are in virtual agreement. For Yoder, Christian pacifism is a bold claim that the Christian lives in obedience to Christ and that this obedience may not be effective as effectiveness is often viewed. For instance, a given war will likely not be

halted even by wide scale protests or acts of nonviolence. The Christian's call is not to be effective but to be obedience. The call is not to make history turn out right – this is God's task. Bayer says much the same thing when he notes that Christian actions in the world may lead to progress in some respects, but this is not the intent of such actions. The Christian can act freely and spontaneously in love and does so without metaphysical pressure: God will bring the Kingdom and Christians need not try to justify their actions in light of some larger scheme to move history forward.

While both Yoder and Bayer are not trying to make history turn out right with their ethical understandings, there are some differences in the way that they see the Christian working. Yoder points to one specific way that the Christian is obedient to Christ – that of Christian pacifism. Yoder makes a case for *what* the Christian ought to be doing, given faith. For Bayer it is not *what* the Christian does but *that* the Christian responds to the neighbour with some human approximation of the love of God. Here the Christian acts in love, freedom, and spontaneity, not with one specific Christian action like pacifism. In this regard, Bayer might call Yoder an “enthusiast” or an “activist” for his claim that pacifism is central to Christian witness. Pacifism might be named by Bayer as a totalizing schema, a human way to collect knowledge in such a way as to edge out the grace of God. Nonetheless, both Bayer and Yoder are clear that God's providence is sure. There will be varying approaches to how one acts given God's providence, but for both Bayer and Yoder the release of metaphysical pressure allows the Christian to act in such a way that there is no need to seek approval or mutual recognition from the nexus of justifications in which all live.

5) Moving grace to the centre of the sermon does not simply erase moral dilemmas. Discernment continues to be necessary. I raise one issue here which is at the same time a critique of Bayer's notion of activism. Bayer sees the Christian responding to the neighbor in spontaneous love as a response to God's lavish grace. Bayer also speaks against a kind of Christian ethic based on activism or enthusiasm which, for him, seems to do with larger social activism projects.

I am not entirely sure where the line is here between spontaneous “at hand” act of love, and activism in the larger arena. A hypothetical case: In a major North American city your Muslim next-door neighbour is being ill-treated in word and in deed by others in your community. There has been some vandalism to her house and some yell curses in her direction. Let us say that in earnest and spontaneous Christian love I bring supper to my neighbour and decide to sit with her on the front porch while we eat together. On the one hand Bayer might approve. In gratitude for the way God has uncurved my life I can see the neighbour and her needs and try to do what I can. I am passing on in an “at hand” way the love that God has passed on to me. However, my act of bringing a meal to her house and sitting with her on the porch could also be seen as enthusiastic or activist. I could now be numbered by the community as an activist. It could be that a local newspaper picks up the story. It could also be that by listening to and eating with my neighbour I become involved in other actions in the community and then in my nation when I promote love to the Muslim neighbour. I ask here, at what point does spontaneous love of neighbour slide into the activism of which Bayer does not approve? Should I “tone it down” when it gets to the provincial, or national stage? If I keep my love quiet and local does that qualify it as “at hand”?⁴⁰⁵ Further questions about other civil rights issues could be asked of Bayer. Should Christians have supported the liberating and “activist” work of Martin Luther King Jr? I have a feeling that Bayer would respond to these questions with the call for a return to the sacraments where God speaks, and perhaps with a reference to the mountain peak where discernment, joined with forgiveness and understanding are crucial. In any case, preaching that has God’s grace at the centre of the sermon opens many questions about Christian action in the world.

405. Carter Lindberg, “Luther’s Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 172. Martin Luther himself was heavily involved in welfare policies which included interest-free loans, school reform, various efforts to alleviate poverty, and local efforts to curb forms of capitalism which were perpetuating poverty. Was Luther not an activist? See also Carter Lindberg, “No Greater Service to God Than Christian Love,” in *Social Ministry in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Foster R McCurley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 57.

6) Moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon includes both personal and communal aspects of grace. Yoder is concerned more with the social side of God's grace and Christian life, and leaves out major issues with regard to individual salvation. Bayer is concerned with both the individual and the social in this regard. What is true for the individual is also true for the church. With God's effective *promissio* the person and the church are lifted from their incurved state to an uncurved state. In this way, the person and the church can now see creation, the world, and the neighbour in need. While the promises of God are spoken in the church, the person and the church face the world not only to appreciate and receive but also to see how love and service might be made manifest.

7) An apt image for preaching which has God's grace at the centre might be the image of the incurved person becoming uncurved and opened by the grace of God. As I will argue in the next chapter, the issue of what the sermon is *doing* – while integrated to what the sermon is *about* – is of crucial importance with regard to grace. Grace is not just a topic of the sermon, but more importantly, the sermon *does* grace through the Spirit. Or, better, in the speech of the preacher, God speaks God's sure and effective *promissio* in such a way that we do not simply understand more about grace but are changed by this grace. The hearers not only learn about grace but are graced in God's promises.

CHAPTER 4

GRACE AND ETHICS IN THE NEW HOMILETIC: A LAW/GOSPEL APPROACH

Moving grace to the centre of preaching requires biblical and theological reflection. As for biblical reflection, we have noted that Paul and some of his twentieth-century interpreters offer a number of insights. Imperatives for the Christian are only offered in light of God's grace filled indicative. Also to be considered are narrative, embodied and spatial approaches. These three approaches bespeak a grace which transforms life so that to be "in Christ" means that the old life has passed away ushering new life and identity. As for theology, we have seen in the conversation between John Howard Yoder and Oswald Bayer that Jesus is a model for life but only in the context of his life, cross, and resurrection. In Yoder and Bayer we have seen that God's grace is not only evident in Jesus Christ, but also evident – although in different ways – in God's lavish gifts of creation, the church, and the orders of creation. Much of the work of Bayer and Yoder cannot be resolved but nonetheless they seem to agree that Christians are not called to bring about the kingdom, or to make history turn out right, for this is God's work. Nonetheless Christians, even if in a broken human way, do witness to the kingdom in good deeds and to speak God's *promissio*, even though these efforts may not be "effective" in the eyes of the watching world.

With these biblical and theological insights in view, we turn now to explore one slice in the last fifty years of North American homiletics. What can homiletics in this time frame teach us about how to move God's grace to the centre of the sermon?

Introduction

While some have argued the gospel of Jesus Christ has gone missing in the preached

sermon,⁴⁰⁶ others have noted that what has gone missing is solid and meaningful ethical reflection.⁴⁰⁷ Each of these issues could be studied, but a third and connected issue is analyzed here – the crucial and often missing relationship between God’s grace in Jesus Christ and Christian ethics in the preached sermon. Here it will be argued that God’s Word understood dialectically as law and gospel provides a robust foundation for moving grace to the centre of the sermon. Placing a theology of law and gospel at the hermeneutical, theological and homiletical centre offers a sound and empowering place for moving grace to the centre of the sermon while at the same time offering guidance for Christian identity and behaviour.

First, a clarifying note about preaching and ethics. Exploring ethics within the discipline of homiletics, as Charles L. Campbell notes, can go a number of directions. Firstly, preaching and ethics may refer to preaching on specific moral, and sometimes controversial topics. Here the preacher might address one of the seven deadly sins, sexual abuse, or poverty. A second area of preaching and ethics may not name particular ethical issues but treat preaching as character formation for individuals and the congregation. Seen in this way, every sermon is seen as having ethical character simply because preaching, as one of the key practices of the church, serves to “build up” individuals and the community in a certain way. A third focus for preaching and ethics focuses on the relationship between God’s grace and Christian ethics. Here the relationship between God’s good news and the empowered life of the Christian is explored.⁴⁰⁸ Yet another focus for preaching and ethics, which Campbell describes elsewhere, has to do with the ethics of preaching. Here such issues as the character of the preacher, the language that is used in the

406. Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), xii, 34–39; Edward Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” in *A Reader on Preaching: Making Connections*, ed. David Day, Jeff Astley, and Leslie J. Francis (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 65–74.

407. Ronald J. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1987), 14–15; David P. Gushee and Robert H. Long, *A Bolder Pulpit: Reclaiming the Moral Dimension of Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998), 3; Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching and Ethics* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), viii.

408. Charles L. Campbell, “Introduction: Ethics and Preaching,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 115–17.

sermon, and the appropriateness of a given sermon in a given situation are pondered with a view to congruity.⁴⁰⁹

This dissertation has been examining primarily the third issue noted above – the dynamics of the relationship between God’s grace and Christian ethics; however, there has been and will be drift into the second area, that of preaching as individual and communal formation. This dissertation does not focus on particular ethical issues to be treated in the preached sermon; however, by focusing on the foundational dynamics of grace and ethics, direction for preaching on particular issues may be derived.⁴¹⁰

In homiletics scholarship over the last fifty years, the subject of God’s grace and Christian ethics has been approached from various theological starting points. For example, philosophical,⁴¹¹ evangelical,⁴¹² neo-orthodox, liberal, and postliberal theology – or some fusion of one or more of these theologies – can serve as starting points.⁴¹³ Together with a given theological starting point, there are denominational theologies and doctrines that inform how grace and ethics are related. As might be expected, Catholic,⁴¹⁴ Lutheran,⁴¹⁵ and Anabaptist-Mennonite⁴¹⁶ theologies will configure the relationship of God’s grace and Christian ethics in

409. Charles L. Campbell, “Preaching, Ethics Of,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 131–33. See also Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 127–34.

410. For an example of a work on a particular issue see John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay, eds., *Telling the Truth: Preaching About Sexual and Domestic Violence* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998). For a study on preaching as community formation see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). A work that weaves together particular ethical issues, formation of community, and the dynamics of grace and ethics is Art Van Seter’s *Preaching and Ethics*.

411. John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 63. Based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, McClure argues that the preacher cannot entirely “identify” with the Other, nor should stay at a distance from the Other, but rather remain in “proximity.” For work on how process theology shapes preaching see Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999).

412. Gushee and Robert H. Long, *A Bolder Pulpit*, 22.

413. Ronald J. Allen, *Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). Allen gives an excellent overview of the various theologies which inform homiletics in the North American context.

414. Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Walter J. Burghardt, *Hear the Just Word and Live It* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

415. David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking the Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

416. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World*.

different ways.⁴¹⁷ Other studies on the topic of ethics and preaching start contextually:⁴¹⁸ socio-economic, gender, ethnic, or specific churchly realities serve as starting points for theological and ethical reflection. Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, for instance, show how socio-economic issues in central American and liberation theologies that have arisen from such locations might inform the priorities of preaching.⁴¹⁹ Christine Smith and others have written out of feminist understandings.⁴²⁰ There are many studies on preaching from the context of African American settings.⁴²¹ G. Lee Ramsey ponders preaching and ethics with communal and pastoral care at the fore.⁴²² With regard to theology, denomination, and contextual issues, this study is conducted by one who has been nurtured in the strong discipleship theology of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in Canada. It is with both appreciation and critique of this home that new insight on God's grace is sought from mainly Lutheran and Reformed traditions. More specifically this explorer sees that Mennonite preaching is heavy on moralizing and is in need of help from the law/gospel school of homiletics.⁴²³ This study thus serves as an effort to understand how discipleship might be firmly grounded in God's grace. Looking at God's Word with a law/gospel dynamic is seen here as a way forward for preaching that places God's grace at the centre of the sermon and at the same time can speak boldly about Christian discipleship.

417. Charles E. Bouchard, "God, Ethics And," in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 124–26. Bouchard notes how Protestants and Catholics diverge on the issue natural theology and the implication this has for preaching.

418. To name some theologies "contextual" is not to say that theologies such as evangelical, Lutheran, or neoorthodox are not contextual. All theologies are contextual in the sense that they are done by particular people at a particular time for particular reasons.

419. Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

420. Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999).

421. Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1995).

422. G. Lee Ramsey Jr., *Care-Full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000).

423. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 73–100. In the critical literature it is only Wilson who describes a law/gospel school of homiletics.

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, the early years of the New Homiletic are examined with a view to seeing the ways in which the newly discovered “experiential” gospel tended to marginalize ethics in the preached sermon with its caution sign on moralizing. The early years were so dominated by focus on the form and effect of the sermon that theological reflection, including reflection on the connection of grace and ethics took a back seat. Second, I introduce the law/gospel school of homiletics in a descriptive way, looking mostly to the work of Paul Scott Wilson and Richard Lischer. Entering homiletics scholarship in the mid 1980s, Wilson and Lischer responded to the early years of the New Homiletic with law/gospel theology as a grammar for preaching which would show that ethics in the preached sermon could be boldly preached, but only in the context of a clearer definition of the gospel.

The Early Years of the New Homiletic: The Gospel is In and Ethics is Out

It will briefly be argued that in this early period of the New Homiletic (early 1960s to the mid 1980s) the narrative form of the sermon and its “event”-related goal served to push direct naming of the ethical life of the Christian into the background where it had virtually no hearing. As we will see, a “moralizing” caution sign was posted for preachers in that early era. However, the intention of the early scholars in most cases was not to eliminate ethics from the pulpit but rather to warn against certain ways of reading the Bible and preaching the gospel. As will be noted, there were positive direction signs for ethics in preaching which were posted as well. However the focus on form rather than theology tended to cover up those positive signs.

While the early New Homiletic had its positive arguments from the organic world,⁴²⁴

424. Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 4. Davis uses organic language, arguing that a sermon should be like a tree with interconnected roots, a trunk, branches and leaves. The sermon should begin with a “generative idea” which naturally unfolds for the listener (21). *Design for Preaching* is often considered the first major work of the New Homiletic. See Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 18.

from the arts,⁴²⁵ and from the New Hermeneutic,⁴²⁶ there were accompanying negative arguments as well. As the new is ushered in, the old is ushered out. In reaction to the previous era of preaching, sometimes called “traditional preaching,”⁴²⁷ the sermon now was to be X and certainly not Y. The pendulum had swung and the preacher was not to sound like the preachers of the previous traditional era. The sermon was to have a plot,⁴²⁸ or to be inductive, but certainly not didactic.⁴²⁹ The sermon would be not be *about* a given doctrine, a text, or even the good news, but a *happening* or *experience* of the gospel.⁴³⁰ Preaching was not to be authoritarian but conversational – respecting the hearer’s experience and interpretation, and at times allowing the hearer to “complete” the sermon.⁴³¹

Thou Shalt Not Moralize

In keeping with the casting aside of didactic style, speaking directly about a doctrine or a text, and the apparent top-down power of the pulpit, the sermon was to steer clear of moralizing. Moralizing was seen as both a hermeneutical and a homiletical problem.

Leander Keck, a New Testament scholar writing for preachers notes that moralistic preaching occurs when the Bible is read as “an assortment of moral precepts and examples.”⁴³²

425. Charles L. Rice, “The Story of Our Times,” in *Preaching the Story*, ed. Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 40. In this early work on narrative preaching Rice advocates that preachers draw from art, poetry, movies, and drama, as they look to the form of the sermon.

426. The New Hermeneutic which had “Word-event” at the centre would focus the New Homiletic on what the sermon was *doing* rather than what it was *saying*. James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2007), 77. See also Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 63–66. A key text on the New Hermeneutic as it was forming the early New Homiletic is James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964).

427. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 13–33.

428. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded version (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 18.

429. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 58. While H. Grady Davis saw the inductive approach as one among others, Craddock would focus almost exclusively on the sermon as inductive. For Craddock, life is lived inductively not deductively.

430. David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 11.

431. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 57.

432. Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 102.

According to Keck, moralizing in the sermon starts with a moralistic reading of the text. For instance, it is very easy to moralize on the life of Jesus:

Moralizing invariably extracts the demands of Jesus from their total context in his mission and thereby treats them as autonomous moral obligations or ideals for those who want to do what's right.⁴³³

Whether preaching from the gospels, prophetic literature, Pauline or Old Testament texts, Keck notes that preachers tend to go for moralistic readings in part because, in the effort to “apply” the text in the preached sermon, the moral realm seems to be the most available and the most relevant.⁴³⁴ In doing so however, the preacher distorts the text. The Bible indeed has much to say about discipleship, righteousness, and moral living; however, as Keck notes, “what is decisive ... is whether this is done in a way that accords with the Bible’s own way of understanding moral obligation.”⁴³⁵

And how does the Bible understand moral obligation? Keck notes that the Bible needs to be read theologically in such a way that God is not the “patron of achievement,” the one who rewards works; but rather, the one who brings the gift of law and grace *so that* the faithful can respond to God with their lives.⁴³⁶ Moralistic readings of the Bible, in short, distort and limit the hearing of God’s gift of grace, easily reducing the sermon to what the faithful should be or do.⁴³⁷

Keck’s desire to bid farewell to moralistic readings of the biblical text and moralistic preaching would resonate with many in the early years of the New Homiletic. It could be argued though that while Keck still has a place for the crucial role of ethics and morality in the preached sermon, the early fathers of the New Homiletic sounded as though they wanted to eliminate ethics entirely from the preached word.

Fred Craddock was concerned on a homiletical level about moralizing in the midst of the “gospel experience” of the sermon. If the sermon is to be an *experience* of the good news of

433. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 104.

434. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 101.

435. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 102.

436. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 104.

437. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 104.

Jesus Christ, then speaking a command, demand, or imperative is simply incongruent. The existential experience of the unmerited gospel of Jesus Christ in the sermonic moment could be muted or undercut with the addition of a “must” or “ought.” According to this understanding of the gospel, one cannot preach unconditional grace and then give a command.⁴³⁸ With this logic the “must” and “ought” were to be gone from the preacher’s tool box.

When the sermon shifts from didactic and authoritarian forms to narrative and inductive forms, the notion of “application” to the life of the listener is exchanged for indirection. Craddock reasons that there is no need for “application” at the end of the sermon because the sermon preached in a narrative or inductive fashion is being “applied” to the life of the believer all the way through, by the very nature of narrative. The free listener on the edge of her seat does not need explanation or application because she has been applying the sermon all the way through.⁴³⁹ In fact, because the listener is enlisted to complete the sermon, making comments of application may become kind of insult to the hearer.⁴⁴⁰

Narratives from the Bible and especially the parables of Jesus would become key in the argument for leaving out the application and including indirect forms of rhetoric in the sermon. Jesus did not explain or apply his parables; he simply told them and let the story happen for the listeners.⁴⁴¹

Those scholars who did see some kind of “application-like” moment at the end of the sermon still insisted on an indirect, not direct approach to the naming of moral issues, lest the sermon sound too authoritarian or undercut the gospel. David James Randolph calls the fourth

438. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 58.

439. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 88.

440. Some years after *As One Without Authority* Craddock revised the notion of the hearer completing the sermon. The ending of the sermon should not be “too obvious not too opaque.” Both the preacher and the congregation should know what has been said. See Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 188.

441. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 65. See Charles L. Campbell’s discussion of the near obsession with the parables in the early years of the New Homiletic in a section entitled, “If you’ve got a parable, you don’t need Jesus” in *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 173.

movement of the sermon “concretion,” where “the text is brought to expression in the situation of the hearer.”⁴⁴² Now that new life has been bestowed by God’s grace through Christ, there can be talk of what the Christian is to do. With the gospel experienced, it is now possible to speak of “doing” in the context of Christ’s lordship. But Randolph notes that naming what the Christian can do in light of the gospel is best done indirectly: the direct approach is to be “used sparingly.”⁴⁴³ Norman Neaves supports the indirect over the direct as well but in a different way. Rather than “a dogmatic or authoritarian tone”⁴⁴⁴ sometimes “a searching question, searchingly posed”⁴⁴⁵ can be the prophetic word that needs to be heard.

Charles Rice ties moralizing with “conventionalism” (his word for traditional preaching) and with “negative and judgmental sermonizing.”⁴⁴⁶ The antidote to moralizing and its accompanying rhetoric is artistic and poetic rhetoric. Art works on a different and deeper level than authoritarian prose. Novels, plays, drama, and movies have ways of subtly communicating the gospel and ethics. With good art people begin to see God’s grace as well as what the Christian life might look like.⁴⁴⁷

With excitement about the event of the gospel, the fathers of the early New Homiletic were keen to post a large caution sign up for all to see: moralizing was the new arch enemy of preaching. Moralizing, with its commands and “ought” language was not just culturally misguided, but was theologically and rhetorically misplaced as well: the gospel, affecting the believer at a narrative or inductive level, could be easily undercut by directly introducing the moral life of the Christian into the sermon.

442. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 75.

443. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 88.

444. Norman Neaves, “Preaching in Pastoral Perspective,” in *Preaching the Story*, ed. Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 115.

445. Neaves, “Preaching in Pastoral Perspective,” 113.

446. Charles L. Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 43.

447. Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination*, 44.

Some Direction Signs for Ethics

The caution sign posted on moralizing in the early years of the New Homiletic is not the entire story though. Some scholars did attempt to give some direction for preaching the gospel together with ethics.

While Lowry wanted the preacher to be indirect with his “yeah!” (anticipating the consequences) at the end of his sermon, there is much to consider. The yeah! is not the “call to commitment” that ended the traditional sermon but rather a place from which to view the new reality of the gospel. The gospel (wheel!) has turned the world on its head, and now there is some time to reflect on what life looks like.⁴⁴⁸

Shauna K. Hannan looks to Lowry’s “yeah!” and concludes that he does not cross the line into law or moralizing: like a runner at the finish line, the yeah! “leans forward into the future” leaving the challenge as a noun, not a verb.⁴⁴⁹ The yeah! is not about doing but about being. In other words, the yeah! is not about the actions a Christian ought to do; rather, the yeah! points to Christian identity.

As we shall see below, something like the yeah! becomes important in the later law/gospel school of homiletics, as ethics is pondered. The end of the sermon does not call for obedience as much as it calls for a new way of seeing and being given the nature of God’s grace. One could still debate with Lowry though whether two minutes is enough time to grant a picture of what that new life might look like. In other words, is “leaning into the future” for only two or three minutes enough?⁴⁵⁰

In *Preaching the Story* Morris J. Niedenthal likens irony or comedy with gospel, and law with the heroic. The hero is self-determined, building a reputation on past actions, and

448. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 82.

449. Shauna K. Hannan, “Lowry’s Loop and the Third Use of the Law,” *Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2008), 186.

450. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 78, 85. In this later work Lowry argues that the “sudden shift,” the gospel moment, should come at 6/7 along the way in the sermon. This leaves very little time for yeah! It could be argued that both the gospel and ethics get very little time in Lowry’s sermon.

concerned with results, while the ironic or comic character (Daffy Duck and the Samaritan woman are examples) is unpretentious, sometimes without direction, and open to surprises.⁴⁵¹ When preaching in the heroic or law voice the congregation is implored to “stand up and be counted, to get involved, to do their duties, to put their lives on the line, to become heroes of the faith.”⁴⁵² The preaching of the gospel, Niedenthal contends, has to do with calling to attention those who are “nobodies” but who are nonetheless open to an encounter with God. What can be more ironic, more comic, than God surprising sinners? “Irony calls attention to and celebrates that amazing grace of God which exposes religious pretension and which utilizes sinners in the advancement and fulfillment of his purpose.”⁴⁵³

The law or heroic approach stresses the conditional (*If you have faith, then ...*), while “the grammar of the gospel” stresses the declarative (*Because of God’s grace, therefore ...*).⁴⁵⁴ It is only in the context of the ironic or comic that God’s “succor and claim” can be properly communicated. The only way listeners can hear God’s claim, the call to mission, witness or live a proper life, is to be fools who are open to God’s surprising grace. In short, the gospel empowers people for the call given.⁴⁵⁵

Niedenthal is articulating a paradox which will be developed later in homiletical circles: the gospel is declarative and not conditional, yet the declaration of grace does come with a “claim” on the life of the Christian. Niedenthal not only provides some ways to think hermeneutically and theologically with the comic and the heroic, but also gives a hint about how illustrations, or stories (read “heroic” stories) in the preached sermon can undercut the good news. The preacher may have indeed evoked an experience of the gospel only to conclude the

451. Morris J. Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel,” in *Preaching the Story*, ed. Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 146.

452. Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel,” 147.

453. Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel,” 146.

454. Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel,” 148.

455. Niedenthal, “The Irony and Grammar of the Gospel,” 149.

sermon with yet another story of a hero of the faith. What is heard in the end then is not gospel irony but law-abiding heroism.

David J. Randolph in his *The Renewal of Preaching* focuses on the sermon as a way of responding to social issues and resisting or countering the powers-that-be. He notes that historically there is social power in preaching: some preaching has altered history.⁴⁵⁶ There can be no planning for such events, but sometimes the preacher and listeners are “apprehended by the power of the living God” and a change or revolution is the consequence.⁴⁵⁷ But still the goal of preaching is not to construct a new society; rather preaching is a call to repentance. This repentance though does lead to the kingdom of God, which is a counter-kingdom to the world:

To repent means to turn toward the new age being brought about by Jesus Christ and to worship him alone as Lord. Having affirmed the lordship of Jesus Christ, the Christian can never relax again under tyrannies which seek “to lord it over” others.⁴⁵⁸

While Randolph does not directly mention the “powers” here, he does anticipate Charles L. Campbell’s treatment of preaching as inherently ethical because by its very nature preaching is an invitation to a new place where the lordship of Christ denotes a struggle with, or resistance to, the powers.⁴⁵⁹

While Randolph flirts with a kind of civil rights era liberalism and advocates an indirect approach, he encourages the preacher to invite those whom God has forgiven to graciously respond by loving others – even if that love means an attitudinal and behavioural stance which may be at odds with powerful forces in society.

456. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 79. Recall that Randolph is writing in the late nineteen-sixties. Martin Luther King Jr. looms large for Randolph as one who battled the powers with preaching and whose preaching altered history (2, 81, 89-90).

457. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 77.

458. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 80.

459. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 69. While Campbell introduces “powers” language to the study of homiletics in the current period, the powers is not a new topic. The apostle Paul spoke of the powers (Romans 8:38; Colossians 2:15) as did the Church Fathers. The powers, in a personal and structural sense, are part-and-parcel of Medieval and Reformation life and theology. See for instance Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*.

Form over Theology in Actual Sermons

The scholars noted above were not trying to rid the Christian life of morality or ethical discernment, but perhaps by posting such a large caution sign against undue moralizing, they simply scared preachers away from speaking about the ethical life of the Christian entirely. The storyteller preacher might say, “Just to stay safe, I will give people a narrative experience of the gospel ... and leave it at that.” Herman G. Stuempfle, a strong Lutheran law/gospel preacher himself, notes why some preachers refuse to venture into the area of obedience or morality:

In our nervousness to introduce a falsifying note of “works righteousness” into the gospel of free grace, we have tended to keep silent about the quality of life which issues from it. We have bypassed the issue of response or obedience to God’s sovereign will. It is enough, we have assumed, to announce as clearly and as persuasively as we can all that God has done for us in Christ and then leave to the Holy Spirit the whole question of Christian obedience.⁴⁶⁰

For fear of losing the experience of the grace of God, obedience or the life that issues from it is not mentioned.

It could also be argued on the other hand that the caution sign on the evils of moralizing had the opposite of the intended effect. The caution sign was perhaps so big, the strategies so complex, that preachers might add a few more stories in their sermons, as a way to be “narrative,” but then slide back to older models for how to “apply” the gospel at the end of the sermon, ending up with a moralistic ending to an otherwise good sermon. How *does* one follow Lowry and “lean into the Christian life” with the gospel without turning the “yeah” into law? This is not an easy task to pull off. How *does* one conclude a sermon in such a way that the hearer can complete it herself? Again, not an easy task even for the seasoned preacher.

Thomas G. Long, in his critique of the early years of the New Homiletic, takes issue not so much with scholars such as Lowry and Craddock, as with how preachers, eager to try the newest thing, misunderstood them as evidenced by poor execution. Lowry could brilliantly pull off his loop, and Craddock could preach in a way that would allow the sermon to be completed

460. Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 63.

by the hearer, but when other preachers tried such ways of preaching, the results were less than impressive. As Long suggests, many preachers were imitating these sermon forms without due reflection.⁴⁶¹ Such focus on imitation without reflection would lead to many questions in the mid and late 1980s and beyond, as we shall see below.

There was theological grappling in the early New Homiletic, especially in works such as *Preaching the Story*, but it seemed to get lost at the popular preaching level. It is telling that Richard L. Eslinger's popular summary of the options in homiletical method focuses almost exclusively on various forms of preaching, as though preaching is a mere rhetorical venture removed from theology. In *A New Hearing*, published in 1987, it is as though Charles L. Rice, Fred Craddock, and David Buttrick are advocating methods and forms which have little theological or denominational particularity.⁴⁶² For all of the talk of form and theology working in concert, forms of sermon in the early New Homiletic were based on various "universal" and general understandings of humanity rather than on theology.

Theological Questions for the New Homiletic

The early New Homiletic's analysis of Christian ethics did not go deep enough theologically, enamored as it was with the form of the sermon. The New Homiletic, which began with "Word-event" or "Christ-event" at the centre, evolved into text-event, with form – mostly narrative form – taking the lead in preaching rather than theology.⁴⁶³

By the mid 1980s the New Homiletic with its focus on form was not so new anymore.⁴⁶⁴ One of the first major theological critiques of the early New Homiletic's preoccupation with form

461. Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

462. Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Homiletical Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

463. Paul Scott Wilson, "New Homiletic," in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 398–401.

464. The term "New Homiletic" was seen in written form only in 1987 even though its roots go as far back as H. Grady Davis and his 1958 work entitled *Design for Preaching*. It is ironic that at the same time the New Homiletic was being named as a movement in preaching, it was beginning to take heavy criticism. Wilson, "New Homiletic," 399.

was Richard Lischer's essay "The Limits of Story".⁴⁶⁵ In a mere twelve pages, he pointedly raises several issues related to the limited form of the narrative sermon. Lischer questions the overemphasis on biblical narrative, especially parables, as preaching texts and as sermon models *par excellence*.⁴⁶⁶ Couldn't the gospel be preached in other ways, with other biblical forms? Didn't Paul and Jesus preach in forms other than narrative?⁴⁶⁷ A connected question focuses on the ontology of narrative. Do people only experience reality through stories? Is life only lived inductively and by story? Or rather, is life made up of broken stories and even unconnected episodes?⁴⁶⁸ Lischer applauds the connection of form and content in narrative preaching, but asks, Where is the deep and direct theological pondering when "indirection" reigns?⁴⁶⁹ Another charge to the early New Homiletic had to do with the assumed listener(s) of the preached sermon. Is the sermon directed at the individual, or can preaching build up the church as a body?⁴⁷⁰ Lastly, Lischer asks, how does an existential experience of the gospel foster community or empower for mission in the world?⁴⁷¹ In other words, are narrative and indirect preaching forms enough for individuals and the church as they ponder tough moral dilemmas and move into witness or mission?

Lischer's claim is that the preacher, the individual hearers, the church, and the world need more than the gospel in narrative form in order to ponder and live out Christian ethics.⁴⁷²

465. Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38, no. 1 (1984): 26–38.

466. Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 27–28.

467. James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 12–13. It is telling that in main-line Protestant circles in North America, there are few substantial works on preaching from Pauline texts between 1970 and 2000. An exception is Daniel Patte's *Preaching Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). In addition to Thompson, two works on Paul and preaching which bring Paul and his ethics into homiletics after Paul had a "break" from the pulpit are Nancy Lammers Gross, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul..* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) and Brad R. Braxton, *Preaching Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

468. Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 30–31; Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, 12, 14.

469. Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 34. As James W. Thompson notes, we need story, but we also need interpretation and the reflective dimensions of faith. See *Preaching Like Paul*, 12.

470. See also David Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus: Homiletical Theology and The Sermon on the Mount* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 230; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 230.

471. Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel.*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 88.

472. Lischer, "The Limits of Story," 34.

Stories, he notes, do not provide “resources for implementing ethical growth or socio-political change.”⁴⁷³ Stories can inspire but

they are not equipped to make the kinds of discriminations necessary for informed ethical decisions; nor by their nature can they issue the direct proclamations and exhortations which, historically, have galvanized the process of social and ecclesiastical reform.⁴⁷⁴

Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, did not preach the gospel as exclusively a narrative affair. King preached not from gospel narratives “but gospel principles.”⁴⁷⁵ Story is needed, but story is not an end in itself. It is rather the “raw material” for theology and for discussion of faithful responses in the present. As he notes, “each story is incomplete as a vehicle for change until it is interpreted.”⁴⁷⁶ Stories need theology. In other words stories need to be interpreted for new times and places lest the gospel and faith be relegated to the past only.

In sum, the New Homiletic pendulum had swung too far on the narrative and experiential side, leaving too much behind – namely: theology, ethics, the church, and perhaps the world along with it. Lischer does not wish to return to the authoritarian, didactic, and moralistic treatises of old, nor is he simply trying to rid preaching of stories, plots, or narrative theologies. His point is that narrative – as the only rhetorical option for preaching – has its limits. Narrative for its own sake, and as the exclusive form of the sermon is too narrow for communicating both the grace of God and Christian ethics, and the dynamics between them.

The caution sign on moralizing, as well as the positive signs posted for ethics in the early years of the New Homiletic have been noted with a few samples. Also, one of the deep critiques directed at the early years of the New Homiletic has been briefly summarized. We are left with Lischer’s penetrating questions, and his plea for theological reflection and the inclusion of the entire canon for the sake of the preaching the gospel.

473. Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” 35.

474. Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” 35.

475. Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” 35.

476. Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” 35.

The Law/Gospel School of Homiletics

It is the thesis of this chapter that the law/gospel school of homiletics points the way to preaching which moves God's grace to the centre of the sermon, powerfully integrating the grace of God and Christian ethical response.⁴⁷⁷ Here I provide a brief introduction to the law/gospel school of homiletics, as defined primarily by Paul Scott Wilson.⁴⁷⁸

The Law/Gospel School of Homiletics: General Introduction

Five key understandings will be noted here in this brief overview. Firstly, the law/gospel school of homiletics draws on Luther's, but not only Luther's and the Lutheran tradition's distinction between law and grace. Secondly, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ understood dialectically, along with the dynamics of human "trouble" and God's "grace" stand at the centre of this homiletical school. Thirdly, this school places the Christ-event at the centre of the event of preaching. Fourth, this school, contrary to one critic mentioned below, is able to encompass all of life; the personal, the social, and even the cosmic. Lastly I look at a flexible method which integrates the content and form of the law/gospel school.

Lutheran Sources ... and More

The law/gospel school of homiletics owes much to Martin Luther's theological method of distinguishing between law and gospel in the scriptures. Simply put, the law is that which brings humans to their knees and the gospel is that which lifts them to salvation – to total reliance in faith on the grace of God.⁴⁷⁹ While the Lutheran and Reformed traditions carried the importance of distinguishing between law and gospel, the law/gospel school of homiletics as such can be described as a twentieth-century postmodern school of preaching where law and gospel – not as

⁴⁷⁷. In *Thinking Theologically* Allen does not divide various theologies of preaching into "schools" but nonetheless helpfully distinguishes between a number of current "theologies" of preaching. The law/gospel school of theology, in Allen's schema, would best be described as a type of neoorthodox theology (49-53), but would share some similarities with postliberal theology as well (54-58). Neoorthodox and postliberal theologies of preaching follow Karl Barth in affirming the centrality of God's revelatory and "crisis creating" Word.

⁴⁷⁸. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. See especially 59-115.

⁴⁷⁹. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 75.

mechanical or static poles, but rather dynamic poles – are key to hermeneutics and theology, and especially for Wilson, key to sermon form as well.⁴⁸⁰ A law/gospel approach, or “trouble and grace” approach, as Wilson prefers to call it, provide discriminating lenses for looking at the scriptures, a theological tool or “grammar” which allow for making connections between trouble and grace in the text and in current life, and clues for the shape of the sermon.⁴⁸¹ For Wilson, as well as for Eugene Lowry, the “deep grammar” of law and gospel suggests movement in the preached sermon: starting with the sin, complexities, limits, wounds, or binds of the human enterprise and moving (but not in a simplistic manner) to God’s deliverance and promise of new life. The core biblical and theological movement which is made at God’s initiative (although it is much more than a “narrative” movement) is the movement from the cross to the resurrection.⁴⁸²

Cross/Resurrection and Law/Grace: Dynamic Dialectics

For the law/gospel school of homiletics the cross and resurrection of Christ is central.⁴⁸³ God’s action for salvation in the cross and resurrection is seen as the biblical lens for theology and preaching. Here death and life, law and grace, failed human attempts at righteousness and God’s certain grace join in a dynamic way. To relate this understanding to Romans, we could say that having been lifted out of death to new life with Christ and in Christ (Romans 5), the Christian is now empowered for new life and free to be obedient to the one who pours out grace (Romans 6). It is only in the context of the indicative of the cross and resurrection that there can be an imperative, or a freedom *for* a new life. Or better stated, it is only because the grace of God

480. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 180. It is not only Luther or Lutherans who have served as inspiration for the law/gospel school. Wilson notes for instance that H. H. Farmer, a Congregationalist, and more obviously so, Milton Crum, an Episcopalian, were discussing the relationship of law and gospel at the heart of hermeneutics and preaching. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 79–80, 85–89. The chart on 88 shows Lowry’s dependence on, or at least resemblance to Crum’s work.

481. Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 16–18.

482. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 98; Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 62, 71.

483. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 74.

has been poured out in Christ that a place of grace has been created where imperatives have meaning.

But the law/gospel school does more with law and grace than simply say that one follows the other. Here ‘law and gospel’ or ‘trouble and grace’ – following the cross and resurrection – retain a tensive theological dynamic that is not reduced to the simple movement from problem to solution, question to answer, or complication to resolution. While the preached sermon may move from law to gospel, or trouble to grace, or cross to resurrection, the two poles are always dynamically and dialectically connected. Put simply, the cross and law on the one pole communicate the trouble with humanity, while the resurrection and the gospel on the other pole communicate God’s saving action. But it is not simply a logical or narrative move from one to the other. In the tensive state of being both sinner and saved “a new meaning emerges that is characterized by a relationship of trust and dependence upon Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸⁴ Even though law and gospel remain in tension, the listener is moved in the preached sermon to once again experience the new life that is offered in Christ.⁴⁸⁵

Another of way of looking at the theological dynamics at play in law/gospel homiletics is to note that there are two tones that sound in the one Word. Richard Lischer's way of speaking about the dynamic between law and gospel is that the one Word has two tones that sound more or less at the same time. For instance, he notes that these two tones sound as God’s people experience the move from

chaos to order, bondage to deliverance, rebellion to obedience, accusation to vindication, despair to hope, guilt to justification, debt to forgiveness, separation to reconciliation, wrath to love, judgment to righteousness, defeat to victory, death to life.⁴⁸⁶

For Lischer, it is not that Israel moved only from chaos to order, or from law to gospel. They did move from chaos to order but then back to chaos again ... and then to order once more. What is

484. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 92. The spark of imagination that results from the tension between two seemingly contrary ideas is the subject of his first book, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 32-48.

485. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 180.

486. Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 33.

more, each time a move happens, the chaos or the order arrived at is different than the last time. While one tone is primary in a given time and place, the other is there as well.⁴⁸⁷ Hope, for instance, is a deep experience because despair has also been experienced: thus in a way both sound together. Or conversely, by viewing despair through the lens of a loving relationship with Yahweh, hope is never far away.

Law/gospel homiletics ties narrative to the law/gospel dynamic. Here narrative form is a matter of rhetoric, but more so a matter of theology. Law and gospel, cross and resurrection, or despair and hope, in the law/gospel homiletic are not to be reduced to a movement of the narrative genre – which is what Lischer witnesses in much of the early New Homiletic. He criticizes narrative preaching for seeing the move from the cross to the resurrection or law to gospel as fundamentally “narrative” moves in the arena of rhetoric. Indeed there may be good reasons to move in a sermon from judgment to righteousness, or from despair to hope, but it is crucial to be theologically aware that righteousness and hope are not simply resolutions to a narrative conflict or the next logical stage in the plot. Rather, in cross/resurrection or law/gospel logic, as the case is made here, the resurrection or the gospel is disruptive, invasive, and cataclysmic. The gospel, as Lischer notes, often breaks open and in fact ends stories. The gospel disrupts what we might call plot.⁴⁸⁸ Gospel or resurrection, righteousness or hope, thus come as an event or a surprise of the Spirit and are not to be assumed. Wilson strikes the same chord when he suggests that “the gospel is necessarily given anew each moment; it is not something that flows automatically from the nature of God or is to be presumed by anyone.”⁴⁸⁹

Performative Christ-event

At the centre of the law/gospel school of homiletics is the performative or encountering

487. Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 36.

488. Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” 33.

489. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 93. Thomas G. Long in *The Witness of Preaching*, Second ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 129. See Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 181.

Christ-event. The sermon is *about* something, and can thus be a teaching tool, but more importantly for this school of homiletics, the sermon *does* something: it is an event of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, Christ encounters and transforms the hearer in the preached sermon. Indeed that the sermon is doing something, having an effect, and granting an experience to the listener, is a feature of much of the New Homiletic. However, the law/gospel school levels a critique on the issue of the nature of that experience. Is the preacher aiming at a Christ-experience, or simply an experience that can be designed by rhetoric or form?

As noted above, the New Hermeneutic, which informed the New Homiletic, had at its centre the notion of the performative meaning of the Christ-event in the text. The preached sermon is not simply new information but transformative in its very hearing. While the Christ-event was key to the beginning of the New Homiletic, we also noted above that Paul Wilson critiques the New Homiletic's development of how the understanding of the Christ-event would shift. Wilson notes that with a focus on form and the text rather than the gospel itself, the Christ-event "has largely evolved to focus on a text event in which the role of the triune God is often unclear."⁴⁹⁰ In other words, while Gerhard Ebeling had his eye on Christ as the performative subject or happening of the Word, some of the directions the New Homiletic took were simply about experience as such, and not about an encounter with the risen Christ.⁴⁹¹ The sermon might have been received as a good experience, but was it a gospel or Christ-event?

Paul Wilson is attempting to build the case that Christ, and not a nebulous 'something' is the clear event of the preached word. In *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, Wilson highlights, for instance, the work of Gerhard O. Forde. Forde makes a connection between the Christ-event in the sermon and proclamation. Here proclamation has a specific meaning and does not simply mean preaching in a general sense. For Forde proclamation is unheard but it is "the present tense unconditional declaration of God news."⁴⁹² The word is not just heard but is heard *for us* and

490. Wilson, "New Homiletic," 400–01.

491. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 64.

492. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 67–68.

from God. The word is proclaimed when the listeners hear that God is for them. When it is clearly heard that God is for us, we have had an encounter with Christ. In this way, for Forde, proclamation is less like any other speech and more akin to sacrament – for here in these words Christ is indeed made present to the listeners.⁴⁹³

In *Setting Words on Fire* Wilson develops the notion of proclamation both theologically and practically. Here the preacher is encouraged to directly proclaim at some point or points in the sermon a direct first-person to second-person word from God. Proclamation – this higher kind of speech – is not to be spoken in a vacuum, or as a tag line, or simply thrown in for effect. But there is a time or times in the sermon when direct proclamation is made. Wilson offers some examples: “I love you. I died for you. I will not let you go. I forgive you.”⁴⁹⁴ Here the grace of God in Christ is placed at the centre of the sermon as a clearly heard and experienced Christ-event. For Wilson, proclamation is not to be thought of as sentences as such, although it includes them, but rather as genres or sections. “Proclamation, as we use it, is more than a brief declaration here or there; it is a section, or more of a sermon that is devoted to providing a setting and context for the Spirit to utter words aflame with love.”⁴⁹⁵

As he develops proclamation in *Setting Words on Fire*, it is not simply God’s grace that is proclaimed. There are trouble genres of proclamation such as condemnation and lament. Proclamation of the gospel can take the form of testimony or celebration, among others. As in his other work in the law/gospel school, Wilson notes here the two voices, trouble and grace, which are proclaimed and heard. In the one we encounter God as pointing out our wrongdoing, or waking us up to our sins and wounds; in the other voice, we encounter the triune God as one who brings sure salvation and healing: “Both are needed: the one condemns sin, and the other names what God does in relation to it. Together they are the gospel; we are both sinners and saved.”⁴⁹⁶

493. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 87.

494. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 81.

495. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 96.

496. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 148.

The one voice “is a lower and incomplete form of proclamation that stops short of the gospel” while the other functions to “bestow the gospel.”⁴⁹⁷

Those who are developing the law/gospel school of homiletics, and indeed many scholars of the New Homiletic, would be strengthened by Oswald Bayer and his development of God’s effective *promissio* as a way to further explore the Christ-event and proclamation in preaching. In other words, Bayer can help the preacher keep the Christ-event at the centre of the sermon. Bayer could easily be put in conversation with Emil Brunner, Gerhard Ebeling, and Gerhard O. Forde,⁴⁹⁸ for they share much in common. As noted above, for Bayer, God’s effective promise communicated in and through speech is at the heart of theology and of Christian life. Bayer stresses the efficacious nature of the word, and does so with theology and language that is very much at home in theologies of the Word noted above. At the centre of Bayer’s theology is the God who speaks in *promissio* and begs for response. Similar to Brunner, Bayer sees God’s speech and preaching as “faith-awakening.” Similar to Ebeling the *promissio* is a sure word bringing certainty to humanity in faith. Similar to Forde, proclamation is sacrament. The word spoken is effective in its speaking. God is present making the words effective in the promise spoken by the preacher in the service of worship.⁴⁹⁹

The Law/Gospel School is Comprehensive

Thomas Long critiques Wilson’s law/gospel homiletic as being essentially the same as a problem/solution schema: zero in on a problem and find the solution. There are aspects of law/gospel theology and preaching that can sound as though this is the case. The preacher may start with trouble and move to grace, and this may seem predictable at times. However, as noted

497. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 88.

498. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 84–88. Here Wilson shows these three scholars distinguish proclamation from theology and preaching from teaching. Brunner notes that proclamation is speech that is “faith-awakening” and “faith wooing” (84-85). Ebeling stresses that proclamation is a form of address that is heard as personal by the listener and brings certainty (85-86). Forde proclamation as a sacramental which seals, delivers, and creates faith (86-87).

499. Bayer, “Preaching the Word.”

above, law and gospel here are seen more as two tones that sound, or as two voices that sound in dialectic, or sound paradoxically with one voice sounding quite different than the other.⁵⁰⁰

Wilson notes that indeed there are many forms that sermons can take. Crucial in the law/gospel school is the “deep grammar” or “deep structure” of the gospel. Individual texts yield many forms, and the communication of those texts in preaching will vary, but deep down the gospel is polar (law and grace) and cruciform.⁵⁰¹

Long also questions the sequence of the theological move from trouble to grace noting that creation, which came before trouble (Adam’s sin I presume) is good, or an example of God’s grace. Long would rather have something like grace-trouble-grace.⁵⁰² I would argue though that in Genesis God creates the world in the context of trouble or chaos: “... the earth was formless, and darkness covered the face of the deep.” (Gen 1:2a). Also, God’s first words are “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3b), suggesting that there was something which was not right at the very outset. Total darkness is “trouble” it seems to me. Seen in this way, trouble does not come about as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin but precedes it. It can be argued from the creation account that it is trouble, and then grace.

In addition to what comes first, trouble or grace, Long wonders if the dynamic of law and grace is too narrow a theological lens for preaching to all aspects of life. Trouble and grace, he argues, are not comprehensive enough “unless they are stretched out of recognizable proportion.”⁵⁰³ Here Long perhaps fails to understand an entire theological tradition. As noted above, Oswald Bayer is able to show that Martin Luther’s single-minded focus on God’s *promissio*, which has law and gospel as well as justification as a central feature, does speak to all of Christian life and witness including beauty and creation, as well as ethics on a personal and social level without undue “stretching.” Granted, what may be a theological stretch for some,

500. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 43–49. Here Wilson writes about paradox in the teaching moments of the sermon, in connection to law and gospel.

501. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 182.

502. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 130.

503. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 131.

may not be for others. At the same time, understanding the depth and breadth of each other in the spirit of understanding traditions other than one's own may be in order here. Caricatures of the limits of Martin Luther's theology abound in many non-Lutheran traditions, my own Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition first and foremost. However, immersion in Luther's writings and theology reveals that a deep understanding of law and gospel, and its accompanying notion of justification by grace through faith, can be comprehensive enough for all Christian life and witness.⁵⁰⁴

The Law/Gospel School Unites Theology and Sermon Form

The law/gospel school of homiletics unites theology and sermon form. Law and gospel, or trouble and grace, and how these dynamics play out in the preached sermon, are spelled out clearly by Wilson in at least two ways in his method as outlined in *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*. Here I look to the "four page" form of the sermon as well as his method for ensuring unity to the sermon.

Wilson's basic guide to preaching, *The Four Pages*, has been received well as an introductory text in evangelical, mainline, Anabaptist-Mennonite, and inner-city social gospel settings.⁵⁰⁵ I postulate that it has been received well in part because it links theology to form with a method that is flexible enough that it can be seen on a continuum from simple to complex. The basics can be taught and put to the practice in a simple way in a matter of minutes. There are four *pages* – meant metaphorically, although Wilson does advocate equal balancing of pages, lest the

504. See Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology"

505. I know this only anecdotally. I have spoken with preaching students and teachers from many North American Christian traditions and have discovered wide use of *The Four Pages*. This work has been used in Mennonite, United Church of Canada, Anglican, and Lutheran seminaries and colleges. I have taught the four page method in seminars with lay pastors in various Mennonite contexts in Canada. I know that various conservative-evangelical schools on the Canadian prairies as well as the preaching classes taught by SCUPE (Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education) in Chicago have used and are still using *The Four Pages* as the primary text book. O. Wesley Allen Jr. notes what I have found to be true. Bringing the four pages to mind when the preacher is stumped on Thursday "can save the day." Even if the resultant sermon does not look like a four page sermon, pondering the trouble in the text and in the world in connection with the grace in the text and in the world has a way of clarifying the hermeneutical and homiletical task. See O. Wesley Allan Jr., *Determining the Form* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 51.

early part of the sermon take over and little room is left for grace.⁵⁰⁶ The sermon is made up of two main movements in four pages. We move from trouble to grace, with the climax or hinge being page three. In brief, page one is trouble in the text; page two follows with analogous trouble in the world. Page three is grace in the text; page four follows with analogous grace in the world.⁵⁰⁷ It is best to name the pages in as brief a way as possible, for the sake of focus. A sermon based on John 4 could be as simple in outline as:

Trouble in the text – The woman is thirsty
 Trouble in the world – We are thirsty
 Grace in the text – Jesus gives the woman living water
 Grace in the world – Jesus gives us living water

Each of the pages of this sermon is studied, discovered, and developed in detail in Wilson's work. The pages can be worked out in deductive or inductive fashion. Wilson prefers though to speak of not just explaining, for instance, the trouble in the world, but showing it, or better, "filming" it. A chapter is given to each page on how to film, show, or tell a story in keeping with that page so that the page is "experienced."⁵⁰⁸ Throughout Wilson continues to note the importance of the given page, why it needs to be there theologically, how it fits into the larger sermon, and what some of the common problems are on that particular page.⁵⁰⁹

Key to the four page sermon is page three where grace is introduced to the trouble at hand. For Wilson the title of this page serves as the theme sentence for the sermon as well.⁵¹⁰ Having this statement of God's grace as the theme sentence for the entire sermon keeps the preacher's focus on the good news rather than on trouble. When preaching on John 4 the temptation might be to stay with the trouble of thirst. It is so easy for a preacher to stay with and focus on what is lacking in the woman's life in ancient Samaria or what we or others lack today. As important as the thirst is for water, for new life, or for justice, this thirst is not the theme of

506. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 73.

507. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*. Page one, 73-104; page two, 107-152; page three, 155-196; page 4, 199-232.

508. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 98–99, 131–40.

509. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 203–05.

510. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 170–71.

the sermon, lest human concerns or trouble dominate the sermon. The theme is that Jesus gives water to the woman. The central theme is always rooted in the triune God and God's actions in the text and in the world. This ensures a sermon where God's grace is central.

How will the four pages be unified? Here is another part of the law/gospel homiletic method that is of help for both the new preacher as well as the veteran. Wilson begins *The Four Pages* with the power of "one," or better, the power of "ones." The sermon should have one text, one theme, one doctrine, one need, one image, and one mission to ensure its unity.⁵¹¹ In a world where it seems we want to speak in threes or feel the need to deluge each other with information – as though information alone will save us – the insistence on staying with one of each of these elements of the sermon simplifies and focuses the sermon for the preacher and the listener. A sermon based in John 4 already has its *one text*. Other biblical texts can be referred to but sticking with this text, and likely one part of the dialogue, line, or action of this text is crucial. If the one text is John 4, the *one theme* would echo the sentence that guides page three: Jesus gives living water to the woman. The *one doctrine* of this sermon could be simply 'salvation'. Other doctrines could indeed be chosen, but at some point one doctrine should be chosen over others so as to clarify God's action in the text and in the sermon. Focussing on salvation in this case allows the preacher to offer a few sentences that enhance the listeners' understanding of this doctrine, likely on page three and page four. But more than simply teaching, the preacher tries to show or film salvation in some way so that the listeners might experience salvation. What is it like to drink that water when one is very thirsty? The *one need* of the sermon could be focused on the need that the woman has for water, which may reflect her deeper needs. There could be an analogous need for life giving water for individual members of the congregation. Again, it is important to focus on one need so that there can be some in-depth discussion or storytelling around that need in pages one and two. There are many images that can be chosen from a given

511. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 33–57.

text.⁵¹² It could be the well itself, or a picture of the woman's facial reactions to the many surprising things that Jesus says. *One image* that might mesh with the need of thirst that could show up on all of the four pages is the image of the water jar. The woman carries the heavy water jar to the well on page one. On page two the jar becomes our jar: what kind of water jar are we carrying around? What are we looking for? On page three we note that because of the living water that Jesus gives, the woman has dropped her jar. She has no need of this heavy jar and the physical water. She goes back to her community leaving the water jar behind. On page four the preacher might let the listeners leave their water jars, their needs, at the feet of Jesus – be free of them and go their own way. When pondering the *one mission* for the sermon Wilson notes Calvin's third or pedagogical use of the law, or "an excitement to obedience." The idea here is not to overwhelm with many big tasks or to try to solve major issues, but to issue one word, or tell a story about one way that listeners live into the gospel, or celebrate the gospel just heard.⁵¹³ This sounds much like the way Lowry speaks about 'mission' in the sermon, as noted above. The *one mission* of a John 4 sermon might be a simple story about someone who relieved another of a heavy load (physically or metaphorically).

Wilson's development of one doctrine and the one mission is especially helpful for Mennonites who want to move God's grace to the centre of the sermon. (It goes without saying that the *one theme* being that of God's grace in the text is crucial as well for keeping grace at the centre of the sermon.) On the issue of the one doctrine, there is a certain kind of "doctrinal inevitability" that I have noticed over the years in listening to and reading sermons. Left unchecked, preachers can be simply reiterating their denominational or personally favourite doctrines year after year. The Mennonite preacher will assume that all sermons need to focus on the doctrine of discipleship. Presbyterians will need to get to God's sovereignty or it's just not a real sermon. The Pentecostal preacher will always get to the Spirit. The social gospel preacher

512. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 93–94.

513. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 56.

will not be satisfied until a given burning issue finds its way into the sermon. When I was a child, there was a preacher who always brought her text around to, “Be sure your sins will find you out.” There are obvious hermeneutical and doctrinal questions which should be asked of such preachers. For our purposes here, Wilson gives the Mennonite preacher the permission to look for something other than discipleship or witness. Not every text has to do with a given denomination’s strong suit. It could be that a text, when studied with open eyes and with a hermeneutic for God’s grace might yield a sermon that centres on and even gives the last word to theological topics like creation, worship, eschatology or God’s holiness.

The idea that the preacher can only note *one mission* in a given sermon spells relief for listeners who are often inundated with things to do, or things to feel guilty about. Focusing on one mission or one action to consider keeps the larger focus on God’s work in the world but also allows the listener to join in with what God is doing. Charles Campbell mentions something similar when he cites Stanley Hauerwas’ line about “the grace of doing one thing.”⁵¹⁴ Christians cannot do everything and are, according to both Yoder and Bayer, not in charge of making history turn out right. What we can and are called to do is witness or give signs to the God who is working in the world. Doing one thing may not solve actual problems, but it does demonstrate God’s love and allow us to work in the places where God is already working.

I have reviewed five general features of the law/gospel school of homiletics. In this section we have seen already some of the ways in which this school treats the issue of ethics or Christian behaviour in light of God’s grace. We turn now in more detail to the issue of where the law/gospel school places Christian behaviour when God’s grace is so dominant.

The Law/Gospel School of Homiletics: Christian Ethics with God at the Centre

The law/gospel school of homiletics places Christian ethics in the context of God’s grace. God’s grace can be moved to the centre of the sermon without abandoning a robust call to

514. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 149, cited in Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 181.

Christian action in the world. In the law/gospel school of homiletics the preacher is invited to see the priority of God's grace and agency, grace and empowering ... and more than empowering, the importance of uniting the personal and the social in preaching, as well as the distinction between teaching and proclamation.

The Priority of God's Grace and Agency

God's grace and activity are central in the law/gospel school of homiletics, placing Christian agency and ethics into perspective. With an emphasis on the contrast between the sin of humanity and the robust nature of God's saving grace, the place of human agency and thus of Christian ethics can be argued as being derivative in the law/gospel school. As noted above, as some North American Mennonites are starting to boldly say, theology comes before ethics. Or to paraphrase Bayer, God's *promissio* always comes first, and gives the framework for response. The grace of God can never be assumed in the sermon or in worship but bears repeating again and again. We do not move on from needing this grace but constantly need to hear about it and be encountered by it in Christ through preaching.

Christian ethics, or better, the on-going empowered life of the Christian, is of great concern in the law/gospel school; however, the emphasis is simply on God and what God is doing in the world, before attention turns to humanity. In this way the law/gospel school puts humanity and its actions in light of God's being and action. Humanity and human action are viewed here in light of what God has done and continues to do, not in light of what humanity can do for itself or for God. In law/gospel theology God comes to humanity *extra nos*, emphasizing humanity's utter dependence on God's revelation in Jesus Christ for everything – including discernment of moral actions and forgiveness when the best of efforts fall short.⁵¹⁵

When grace is simply glossed over in a perfunctory way to get to the work that Christians need to do, as often happens in moralistic sermons, the listener is left with an incomplete

515. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 118.

understanding and experience of God's grace.⁵¹⁶ God's grace is primary and all else flows from that core. Speaking a word of grace for fifty percent of the sermon, and ending the sermon not in "ethical application" but with what God's grace is doing in the world, as Wilson notes in *The Four Pages of the Sermon* may seem wooden, but it ensures that good news of God's grace, rather than bad news, is the primary sound that the listeners encounter.⁵¹⁷

God's Grace is Empowering

Keeping grace at the centre of the sermon means that a word of empowerment is not just heard but experienced. The law/gospel school of homiletics views Christ, through the Spirit, as empowering the believer for Christian life. Because of what has been done in Christ through the cross and resurrection, the believer belongs to Christ, and in the context of being "in Christ" is enlisted to a certain kind of life. Christians are not only saved *from sin* by the cross and resurrection but also set free *for life*, because the Christian dwells in a sphere of grace where the way of life called for is supplied for in abundance at the same time.

That the actions of the Christian are empowered by God through the Spirit means that the preacher cannot make the simple equation that Christian ethics = law. Christian ethics is not entirely understood as a return to law, but rather might be understood, in Christ, as an expression of the fulfillment of the law. Properly understood in the realm of Christ, Christian ethics is not law, trouble, or a burden, but "an empowered opportunity."⁵¹⁸ The imperative, Richard Lischer suggests, "in faith," is no longer law. He states that "in order to avoid confusion we are well to use other words than 'law' in giving substance to that imperative."⁵¹⁹ And yet, just as law and gospel sound together, the empowered opportunity is always conditioned by human frailty, which

516. Jeremy Bergen, ed., *Preach Peace and Pursue It: Peace Sermons by Canadian Mennonites* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1999). Many of the sermons in this collection note God's grace or empowerment in a line or two and then move on to the "real" issues at hand such as stories about violence and peace, evidence for Jesus' pacifism, and why listeners should be pacifists. See for instance 32-34; 35-39; 42-49.

517. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 29.

518. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 155

519. Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 40.

can turn to law or trouble. The grace or promises of God need to be regularly heard or encountered, “for gospel, once spoken in the world, easily deconstructs and becomes a new law in human hands.”⁵²⁰ Again, Bayer is helpful here. As noted above, any question of ethics is brought back to worship – to God’s *promissio* in proclamation, water, and food.

Grace is More than Empowerment

Moving God’s grace to the centre of the sermon does not simply mean that we are placing empowerment at the centre of the sermon, as though the Christ-event only forms the Christian or the church for that which has been preconceived of as good actions in the world. God’s grace does not exist solely for Christians to do good or to find a personal or communal identity. God’s grace is, as Bayer cautions, still something that is mysterious and even alien. Beyond empowerment, grace, as noted above, is salvific or pardoning. Here the Christ-event has us responding to the divine, to the vertical relationship first. Grace as empowerment must always be seen as part of that grace which also forgives of sin and makes the Christian free, and perhaps free of a certain way of ethical thinking. While the Christian may be empowered by Christ in the preached sermon, the sermon does not simply aim at empowerment for what we consider to be right action. Rather, Christ is preached, and Christ will do what Christ will do, including confronting us on those actions or ethical paradigms that we hold dear. The Christ-encounter may indeed transform us, including our assumptions about ethical behaviour. Preaching the grace of God, rather than single-minded focus on social issues, may in fact make our ethical action more radical. As Wilson notes, “ethics is stronger in the presence of the proclamation of the gospel because people are cast on God’s resources. Ethics becomes radical because it is transformational and empowered.”⁵²¹

Personal, Social, and Structural Life are United

Ethics of a personal and social variety is assumed in the law/gospel school. Paul Scott

520. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 93.

Wilson states that issues of individual piety and social justice – too long exclusive categories – need to be joined in the preached sermon.⁵²² One unsung hero in the history of the New Homiletic in this regard is Herman G. Stuempfle Jr. Wilson notes that he was one of the earlier homileticians to expand the all-too-common notion that justification was only an individual reality – only about the relationship between the solitary individual and God. Stuempfle notes two kinds of law and gospel. The vertical axis communicates God’s judgment and forgiveness between God and the individual, while the horizontal suggests the “mirror of existence” that the law provides. Law as mirror exposes the world in its fallen condition. Here the law does convict of sin but on a larger scale – boldly revealing the fallen nature of humanity in states such as alienation, doubt, and despair.⁵²³ God’s love and forgiveness meet these relational issues on their own terms – coming as the gospel in hope, certitude, and reconciliation.⁵²⁴ In other words, God judges and forgives on a personal level, but also forgives and justifies on a relational level. Wilson notes that while Stuempfle did not extend law/gospel preaching to larger structural issues, he allowed preaching to move from focusing on the individual to focus on social realities as well.⁵²⁵

As noted above, morality on a personal and social level are united in the book of Romans. Those in the new sphere are with others and empowered by God’s grace to present themselves in prayer, worship, love, mission, reconciliation, nonretaliation, service, and paying financial dues. Here individual piety, communal life, and witness are joined. Michael J. Gorman calls such a joining of worship and social concern “spirituality.”⁵²⁶ In sum, ethics as both personal and social

521. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 156.

522. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 38. Robert Stephen Reid in *The Four Voices of Preaching: Connecting Purpose and Identity Behind the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 96,101, does not entirely understand Wilson when he places him in the “Encouraging Voice” category, as though Wilson is addressing personal rather than corporate concerns. While on a continuum Wilson may be more on the personal side than, say, Charles Campbell, Wilson has solid communal and justice concerns. See for instance *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 130.

523. Stuempfle Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel*, 24.

524. Stuempfle Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel*, 50–54.

525. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 84.

526. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 14.

is taken not so much as fleeing from singular sinful actions and simply doing nicer actions, but rather as having more to do with *identity as persons in Christ* or *a way of life* for Christians. An identity bestowed even in unmerited grace assumes a calling. How does the preacher use the best of theology to speak of these things?

Teaching and Proclamation

Distinguishing between teaching and proclamation is helpful as the preacher aims to move God's grace to the centre of the sermon. As noted above, Paul Wilson, together with others who have worked with a theology of the Word, have come to define proclamation in a specific way. Proclamation has to do with directly naming both God's judgement, as well as God's love and grace in a heightened and deliberate way in the preached sermon. Wilson offers not only a theology of proclamation which distinguishes between proclamation of trouble and proclamation of grace, but also distinguishes between teaching and proclamation.

Moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon means that there still will be teaching in the sermon on various topics including the nature of Christ, or particular doctrines, or even directions for Christian behaviour. Teaching is crucial in preaching. Teaching of the historical-critical variety in the sermon helps the listener understand better for instance, an action of Jesus, or the complex interaction of characters in a given story, or the setting of one of Paul's letters. Teaching about a certain doctrine in connection with a text, and teaching personal or social ethics are all important in the sermon.⁵²⁷ Teaching about law and gospel, teaching about grace is crucial, and can be done in creative ways.⁵²⁸

Teaching moments or sections in the sermon can be both connected to and yet distinguished from proclamation, where the address of God is clearly heard. Here, what the sermon is *doing*, as opposed to what it is *about*, is clarified. A sermon may be about God, about one of Jesus' parables, or even about grace. But unless a word or section of the sermon

527. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 26–52.

528. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 55–76.

introduces God to the congregation, or allows Jesus to speak the parable to the congregation, or has God speak a word of grace to the congregation, there may be no encounter with the triune God. Wilson distinguishes between teaching and preaching:

Teaching provides the theological, historical, and cultural information that people need about who God is now and in history, but it does not on its own introduce them to God. Information about someone is not a substitute for actually meeting the person. Teaching provides the informational basis, understanding, and guidance for such an encounter, but to meet God, people need just information *about* God – they need communication *from* God. They need to hear God speaking.⁵²⁹

Wilson, as noted above, has very practical suggestions for what proclamation may sound like. It will be first person address as though from God. “Change *your* ways. I love *you*. I forgive *you*.”⁵³⁰

In the law/gospel school, placing grace at the centre of the sermon means that proclamation takes priority over teaching, even though, as noted above, these two are intertwined in several ways. Indeed proclamation needs teaching and would not be complete without it.

It is clear in this school that any teaching of Christian morality, or drawing an ethical lesson from the life of Jesus or another biblical character, is always done in the context of a higher purpose – that of proclaiming God’s grace. But this does not mean that teaching on an ethical issue or pressing a behavioural concern is eliminated from the preached sermon. It could in fact be that ethics in the law/gospel school may be more radical than in those schools which begin with strong contextual concerns for justice. When ethical instruction is the goal of the sermon – rather than proclamation of the gospel – the entire enterprise sounds more like teaching than preaching, and the grace of God often gets lost.

Preaching can be ethics; but when that is all it is, it is simply teaching. Then we as listeners emerge with understanding. At the end of proclamation, however, where ethics plays a significant role, we may emerge with a sense of being redeemed and empowered by God to perform the moral duties we are called to do as Christ’s disciples.⁵³¹

529. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 92.

530. Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 92.

531. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 152.

Conclusion

The moralistic sermon is still very much with us. A number of works in the area of homiletics written in the last ten years, especially those which treat the subject of ethics, continue to decry moralizing, over-application, and use of parables or Jesus Christ as simple ciphers for the ethics of the day.⁵³² Preachers continue to simplistically treat character traits from biblical characters as gospel without due reflection. Conditional language, as well as “ought” and “must” language still dominate sermons. Further, comments on morality are still the default when the preacher moves inevitably, in the last minutes of the sermon, to “application.”⁵³³

Moralizing, as has been argued here, cannot simply be treated on a rhetorical level. Theological analysis and reflection is needed. Charles Rice noted in the early years of the New Homiletic that listeners want moralizing as much as the preacher likes to dole it out: “Many sermon buffs feel cheated if the preacher does not pronounce moral judgment on their petty vices; for them the sermon provides a gentle, tolerable flagellation.”⁵³⁴ Our wish to justify ourselves with our works and on many other fronts runs deep, and the only cure is theological exploration of that trouble in connection with God’s effective unmerited grace.

Without a clear understanding of God’s grace, direct or indirect reference to given theological topics in the preached sermon will still lead to moralizing. The law/gospel school of homiletics places the triune God at the centre of theology and preaching. With God at the centre bringing Christ from death to life, and graciously pouring out the Spirit, Jesus is no longer a mere teacher but the reigning Lord of all and is present in the preaching of his Word. In preaching which takes seriously both teaching and proclamation, the sermon is *about* God’s grace but is

532. Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus*, 102; Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 148; Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 44–45; Paul Scott Wilson, *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 73.

533. Sidney Greidamus, “Moralism,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 127.

534. Rice, “The Story of Our Times,” 43.

more importantly an event of the *presence* of Christ. When the preacher can find ways to allow the listeners to meet the living Christ in proclamation, other aspects of faith and ethics fall into place.

The law/gospel school of homiletics shows a theological and methodological way for the preacher to move grace to the centre of the sermon. The law/gospel school of homiletics, with its roots in Lutheran and Reformed theology proves to be a radical home from which to explore God's grace and Christian ethics, even from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. This school is radical because it claims that the triune God is in control of history and has invited humanity through Christ to join in the proclamation and the living out of that good news. By naming God's grace and promises in direct ways, the listener is uncurved and can see the world in its beauty, as well as see the places where the neighbour needs love.

CHAPTER 5

MOVING GRACE TO THE CENTRE OF THE SERMON: THEOLOGY AND HOMILETICAL PRACTICE

This study has demonstrated that grace can be moved to the centre of the sermon. I began by showing that there is a temptation in the Mennonite tradition to place an emphasis on Jesus and his call to discipleship in such a way that it focuses on human ability rather than on God's grace. I also suggested that contemporary Mennonite theology is making this shift on many fronts, including the areas of history, theology and worship. This study joins this wave by looking at how grace may move to the centre of the preached sermon.

The move from sermons that focus on human agency to God's agency, or from human effort to God's grace, needs to include reflection on the Bible, theology, and homiletics. In chapter one we noted that in addition to the indicative and imperative approach, there are narrative and embodied approaches to Pauline literature which clearly place God's action at the centre of the faith, but at the same time call the Christian into a certain identity. The ones who are "in Christ" are free and yet at the same time "obedient" to the one who has freed them. As for theology, we have seen in the debate between John Howard Yoder and Oswald Bayer that Jesus is a model for life but only in the context of his life, cross, and resurrection. In Yoder and Bayer we have seen that God's grace is not only evident in Jesus Christ, but also evident – although in a different way – in God's lavish gifts of creation, the church, and the orders of creation. Much of the work of Bayer and Yoder cannot be resolved, but nonetheless they agree that Christians are not called to bring about the kingdom, or to make history turn out right, for this is God's work. Nonetheless Christians, even if in a broken human way, do witness to the kingdom in good deeds even though these efforts may not be "effective" in the eyes of the watching world. Chapter

Four's survey of the issue of moralizing in the preached sermon has shown that the New Homiletic swung so far with a particular notion of the gospel, that Christian behaviour and ethics were virtually left out of the sermon. We saw that the law/gospel school of homiletics places God's grace at the centre of the sermon. Here the tensive nature of law and gospel or trouble and grace allows for a preached sermon where human sin and wounds are taken seriously and where God's grace is proclaimed. Proclamation includes a clear address from God to the listener through the voice of the preacher, to the effect that the sermon is doing the gospel and is not simply about the gospel. Both teaching and proclamation are crucial in preaching, but it is in proclamation that Christ is made present in the preached sermon.

Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous chapter. After examining the early years of the New Homiletic and looking at the law/gospel school of homiletics in a descriptive way, this chapter is meant to be constructive. Here a number of theological issues close to the heart of theology and preaching are explored with a view to moving grace to the centre of the sermon. If we move grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon, how might new understandings of Christology, justification/sanctification, ecclesiology, and eschatology emerge? Secondly, this chapter introduces a resource for the preacher who wants to move God's grace to the centre of the sermon. I propose a sample syllabus for a second-level preaching course which allows the homiletics student to consider how God's grace might be placed at the centre of the sermon. I include bibliography already noted as well as some new sources. As a part of this syllabus I briefly describe and analyze several sermons which could serve as examples for students interested in moving God's grace to the centre of the sermon. Lastly, I show the course schedule and offer a rationale. In the final section of this chapter I offer a brief conclusion to this dissertation.

Law/Gospel Homiletics: A Mennonite Experiment

The law/gospel school of homiletics offers a number of theological considerations and

practical advice for preachers as they ponder what to do with the problem of moralizing in the preached sermon. Serious consideration of law/gospel theology as an answer to moralizing is not as simple as just throwing a new theological concept into a given theological matrix, like God's grace for instance, and expecting simple addition. Any alteration to one article of faith or doctrine will have implications for all other aspects of faith within a given theological matrix. Moving God's grace from the margins to the centre will reconfigure the entire matrix. We cannot simply add a radical sense of God's grace as understood in the law/gospel tradition to the centre of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology (where God's grace is assumed or marginal) and not expect theological reconfiguration on a number of fronts. This section demonstrates, in part, what happens when we introduce the law/gospel school of homiletics to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, which, as has been noted above, tends toward moralizing in the preached sermon.

Time and space do not permit a visit to all topics of faith in a given theological matrix. We cannot deal here with all of the main topics in systematic theology, but we can begin. The following four theological categories are central to the scriptures, to Christian faith, and have been treated thus far in this study, especially in the chapters on Bayer and Yoder. Further, these topics are debated theological issues in the New Homiletic. Here Christology is added to the theological topics of justification/sanctification, ecclesiology and eschatology which were looked at in comparing Yoder and Bayer. An introductory statement of each follows:

Christology: Jesus Christ is God's gift. It is only in the context of Jesus Christ as sheer gift for both pardon and empowerment that his life can be seen as a model for faith. That Jesus is a model for ethics does not call for a mimicking of his life in a wooden moralistic way. Rather, Jesus' ministry, parables, teaching, and actions – when placed in the context of the cross and resurrection – provide a vision for the shape of the Christian life.

Justification and sanctification: As has been noted throughout this study, justification and sanctification have individual, ecclesial, social, and even cosmic implications. God's justifying and sanctifying grace is active in all domains of life and is intimately related to personal and

social ethics. Further, God's justifying and sanctifying love show that God does not stand aloof from the troubles of the world but is intimately involved in them. Further, God's justifying and sanctifying love frees the individual and the community to love God and to serve the neighbour (Matthew 22:34-40). Contrary to the caricature of Martin Luther, "works" are good – as a response to God's love. Serving the neighbour, when done thankfully in light of God's gracious act in Christ, is assumed in the Christian life.

Ecclesiology: The church is God's gift through Christ, as well as a sign of what God is doing in the world. In the law/gospel school the church is a sign of the kingdom but at the same time the church humbly confesses that it is a part of the sin of the world. The Mennonite church, with its high expectation of a pure church, can learn from the Lutheran tradition where the church is paradoxically a community of sinners/saints.

Eschatology: God is bringing a future and yet, from God's perspective, time is intermingled. Nonetheless, humans do experience past, present, and future. In the cross and resurrection the old era has been declared passe and the new era is both proclaimed and enacted. But even while the gospel is proclaimed and made effective in its speaking, brutality, pain, and sin seem to hold sway. A proper view of eschatology makes a claim for God's promise of a new creation and a new future which assures hope, promise, and direction for the present. The Christian is called to "live into" the shape of that future in the now, knowing that God has promised to bring the kingdom into fruition.

Jesus Christ is Gift before Model or Teacher

Moving grace to the centre of Mennonite preaching will require that Jesus Christ is seen as gift before he is seen as a model for life. Here we need to clarify that Jesus Christ as gift is not limited here to Meilaender's definition where he was speaking about grace as gift and favour or pardon and power. Here we use Oswald Bayer's definition. God has spoken a gift to humanity in creation, peoplehood, family, and order. Jesus Christ is the embodiment or verification of God's

promissio, God's gift. Put simply for the purposes of this study, Jesus Christ is to be taken in as gift before he is a model for the Christian life. Jesus Christ is Saviour before he is teacher, for it is only in his saving grace that he can be teacher. In order for the sermon to be clear on Christ as gift, the hermeneutical lens must be focused on God's gospel and not on Christian morality. The latter always flows from the former and thus must be made explicit.

The hermeneutical lens of the law/gospel school is unapologetically theological on the issue of keeping God and God's grace at the centre of theology and the sermon.⁵³⁵ When looking to the biblical text, the gospel distinguished as trouble and grace are the eyes through which the scripture is seen. In addition to good historical and literary work, the preacher-interpreter is theologically biased toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. A hermeneutic that has law/gospel theology at the core affirms the priority of the life, death and resurrection of Christ as gift. The life of Jesus – his parables, teachings, and actions of love – are seen in light of his death and resurrection and of the larger story of the triune God.

How does one read the text in this way? Richard Jensen points the way when he recalls Luther's way of reading the gospels.⁵³⁶ Jensen quotes only a few lines from Luther; here is a fuller reading:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favour through the gospel. If you *pause here and let him do you good*, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.⁵³⁷

Christ is first gift and then – and only then – is he to serve as a model for the life of faith. Luther

535. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 32.

536. Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1995), 72.

537. Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521)," 95. My emphasis.

is not discounting Jesus as an example, but Jesus can only be an example “in faith” after Christ is received as gift:

Now that Christ is gift, the other follows: Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. See, there faith and love move forward, God’s commandment is fulfilled, and a person is happy and fearless to do and to suffer all things. Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian. As widely as a gift differs from an example, so widely does faith differ from works, for faith possesses nothing of its own, only the deeds and life of Christ. Works have something of your own in them, yet they should not belong to you but to your neighbor.⁵³⁸

Looking to Christ for how one lives the Christian life is not discounted but rather is seen in the context of Christ who continues to nourish individuals and the church in and through the Spirit. Luther suggests though that receiving the gift of Christ requires that the reader(s) and the listener(s) “pause and let him [Christ] do you good.” Pausing to let Christ do some good suggests the very presence of, and encounter with Christ in the reading and hearing of the preached Word. Placing grace at the centre of the sermon, following the reminder to pause and let Christ “do you some good,” means that there needs to be a space or several minutes dedicated to exploring and naming this reality. Again, Wilson’s four-page sermon ensures that there is space for the listener to pause and let Christ do some good.

How does one read the scriptures and preach so that listeners can pause to let Christ do some good, and what might this have to do with preaching and ethics? Perhaps a reading of the good Samaritan story can stand as an example. The so-called good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37) is assumed to be about morality and is often read through that lens. The action of the Samaritan is seen as laudable, and after telling the story Jesus asks, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The answer if followed up with “Go and do likewise.” An obvious morality tale, or so it seems. The very title we have given the story, obviously not in the original text, reveals a moralistic bias: the “good Samaritan”

538. Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521),” 95.

assumes that the agent of the moral action is the hero of the story and thus the one with whom the reader and the listeners must identify and follow.

Michael King and Ron Sider, both from Anabaptist traditions, read the text in a moralistic way. The lens they take to the text is laudable in many respects. Given the nature of North America's wealth and the poverty of the developing world, the text must be read with issues of justice and Christian service in mind. The one with whom the preacher is to have the congregation identify is the good Samaritan. After all, given the state of the poverty of the world, the rich need to help. They should not pass by on the other side of one who needs help.⁵³⁹ Here the lens taken to the text ensures a moral reading and a moralistic sermon in which North American Christians will simply be coaxed to feel guilty and then help others. Jesus functions here as a coach for the rich, who need to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

This kind of reading only reinforces the misconception that North Americans – Mennonites in this case – do not need to be on the receiving end of the gift of Jesus Christ. There is no space in this reading for listeners to pause and let Christ do them some good. Christ is not an “event” here but a model and teacher of morality. By not having Christ come to the listeners to do them some good, grace is not clearly spoken and the event of grace for the listener is difficult to hear.

Luther promises a better reading and perhaps an even more powerful one because Christ actually shows up to bandage the wounds of the listeners. John T. Carroll and James R. Carroll suggest a reading which would be closer to what Luther and the law/gospel school of homiletics might preach. The one with whom the congregation identifies is the broken man in the ditch; the powerless one.⁵⁴⁰ This is the one to whom the gift is given and this is where humanity stands in reference to God. A sermon from such a reading would pause to look at the man in the ditch and observe, for some duration, the help he receives in attention, bandages, hospitality, and love. This

539. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World*, 97.

540. John T. Carroll and James R. Carroll, *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers, 1996), 7–8.

kind of reading would necessitate a proclamation of Christ as gift giver and announce humanity as gift receiver. Only after the sermon has paused for some time to “let Christ do some good,” would the preacher move to how the gift of Christ might shape life. The hurt man, now in the inn, will likely never see the Samaritan again and cannot repay him. The gift cannot be returned. Rather than literally return the gift, the newly empowered man can now graciously praise God and serve his neighbours – practices which will allow the man to meet Christ in and through the Spirit.

Walter Brueggemann’s sermon entitled “Pain Turned to Newness,” found in the appendix of Charles L. Campbell’s *Preaching Jesus*,⁵⁴¹ allows Christ to come to the listener to offer healing. It would be easy to focus on Jesus the healer as a model to follow, but Brueggemann chooses to allow Christ to pause and do the listener some good. This sermon, based on the healing of the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:24-34, keeps the focus on the woman who has need and on Jesus the healer. She is at first characterized as a marginalized person, but before too long the preacher brings the listener into her life to the extent that the listener identifies strongly with her. Like her, we all have needs that require desperate attention: we want to touch power. Once she is healed by Jesus near the middle section of the sermon, the preacher turns from the woman to Jesus’ action of healing and his words to the woman. The “daughter,” “your faith has made you well,” and “go in peace,” are for the woman but also spoken to the listeners of the sermon. If we have not heard it directly yet, near the close of the sermon Brueggemann says, “We are all hemorrhaging women, with life bleeding out of us, tired of being abused, with exhausted resources, scarcely able one more time to reach out for a touch.” We are also like the disciples and the bystanders, the preacher adds. Into this list of who the listener identifies with the preacher does share one line about how we are like Jesus in the story, but he offers it with some caution: “We are not Jesus but we do as baptized folk share in his power and in his capacity to heal, to let ourselves be touched so that some of our God given power can flow

541. Brueggemann in Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 259–64.

to the lives of other bleeding outsiders.” Note that the preacher places the Christian in the passive: “to let ourselves be touched.” The sermon ends with how all are dazzled by what Jesus has done for the woman, for her community, and for the listener. The last line is a line of proclamation: “The word is for us and for our fellow bleeders: “Go in peace, be healed of your disease, by your faith be whole.”⁵⁴² The preacher has allowed Christ to pause and do the listener some good by placing the congregation in the place of those who yearn for healing and then are healed. We can let ourselves be touched too and so be a part of other’s healing, but only in the context of our baptism and in the power that comes from Christ.

Justification and Sanctification

Moving grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon means that more work needs to be done on what is meant by justification and sanctification. After even a brief glance at Bayer’s work on Luther, Mennonites can no longer sideline Luther’s notions of justification for the reason that the topic of justification is somehow limited to individual salvation with no implications for community, or the larger social issues in the world. Justification is not a narrow topic. To be sure, the *individual* is made right before God in the act of justification, but this is just part of the story. Justification and sanctification can be viewed intra-personally, socially, and even cosmically as has been seen in the work of both Yoder and Bayer. For Yoder, justification has implications for God’s act of reconciling humanity to God and to each other. For Bayer, justification signals not only a state of being (the need to self-justify), but also points to God’s work of justification which frees the individual from self-justification, and thus for a life of freedom. Further, it is too simplistic to say that a strong theology of justification has little to say about ethical behaviour. As has been seen above, for Luther, the justifying love of God has an immediate effect: in thanksgiving, and empowered by the Spirit, the justified individual cannot

542. Brueggemann in Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 264.

help but spontaneously and joyfully serve the neighbour. The uncurved human can now see, appreciate both beauty and brokenness, and respond.

Justification and Sanctification: Individual, Social, and Cosmic

In homiletics as well as in theology, language games are being played with Luther's writings which make his theology more relevant to current social realities. For instance, Jacobsen and Kelly, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, simply shift some of Luther's language from the singular to the plural. The *pro me* (for me) of Luther is changed to *pro nobis* (for us) and *pro aliis* (for others).⁵⁴³ God is "for us," and "for others," not only "for me." This does not negate individual piety but does signal that faith is an individual as well as communal affair. Bayer, as noted, claims as well the individual, social, and cosmic breadth and depth of God's justifying actions.

Justification and sanctification have implications for how individuals and the Christian community relate to larger society. Kelly and Jacobsen, while not referencing Oswald Bayer, echo his notion of self-justification as a state of being – a personal and social problem. Humans live in ways that try to justify themselves to the marketplace and the nation.⁵⁴⁴ The individual is always trying to prove herself. Self-justification in relation to all areas of life is one of the powers which God's justifying word of law and grace unmasks and then transforms. In a society that works so hard to justify itself and even to sanctify itself with constant self-improvement, the radical grace of God, say Kelly and Jacobsen, is indeed most suited.⁵⁴⁵ A word of justifying unconditional grace is especially relevant and surprising in a society that does not "do" unconditional grace well. David Buttrick calls for repentance rather than self-help plans for the individual who seeks to be socially acceptable. Repentance here means to "give up the old games

543. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 19.

544. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 114.

545. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 17.

of social justification, and to trust God whose ‘amazing (justifying) grace’ has been disclosed in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁴⁶

One of the reasons why law/gospel theology in some of its expressions is cited as irrelevant is because of its apparent abstract nature: theology happens “out there” with God and “in faith” but does not connect with actual life.⁵⁴⁷ As noted above, Bayer’s reading of Luther has law/gospel related in intimate ways to the believer and the church. Law/gospel theology with its justifying cross and resurrection are not at all abstract and removed from the issues of life. Death, injustice, and human violence in all their darkness stand naked at the cross and are fully faced in stark reality. The cross gets to the heart of reality, human sin, and woundedness in an intimate and personal way. The resurrection demonstrates that death is not the last word and reminds humanity that God can take all the evil that is thrown at God and transform it into justifying and unconditional love. This indeed is good news not only for the individual but for the world as well. Law/gospel theology is realistic in the sense that it does provide a genuine and brutally honest assessment of the realities of all domains: “Consistent with its own paradoxical disclosure in the cross of Christ, the gospel uses words to disclose how things really are and opens up venues of hope and possibility that in turn empower us to engage and persist in struggling against injustice.”⁵⁴⁸ The scope of the power of God’s justifying and sanctifying love goes even further than the social realm. The gospel has implications even for the cosmos – which in effect means all of creation. Everything that has been broken, in all of God’s creation, is a candidate for God’s saving grace: “God’s unconditional promise made to creation in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus speaks of anything and everything in the cosmos that is a result of the rift between Creator and creature narrated in Genesis 3.”⁵⁴⁹ When one sees that God’s justifying and sanctifying work

546. David Buttrick, *Preaching the New and The Now* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 109.

547. Scott Hendrix, “Open Community: The Ecclesial Reality of Justification,” in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burges and Mark Kolden (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 236.

548. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 115.

549. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 25.

has individual, ecclesial, social, and cosmic implications, new possibilities open up for the focus of a given sermon. It may be that at certain times the preacher emphasizes the troubled conscience, while at other times the community of the sanctified is built up. At other times the places where God is working in the world might be noted; but these are a matter of emphasis. It is not a matter of stating once and for all where God is justifying or making right:

The world of creation — the *cosmos* — and the world of social and political life —the *polis* —belong to God as much as the interior of the troubled conscience belongs to God. God is gracious to sinners, and it seems hard to claim that God would be somehow less gracious to *cosmos* and *polis* than to *psyche*.⁵⁵⁰

Law/gospel theology with its close connection to the death and resurrection of Christ and justification need not shy away from issues of conscience, the building up of the community, social justice, or the powers that hold sway. The grace of God can cut through all brokenness and bring a word to many domains of life.

At the same time that justification and sanctification are to be understood broadly, the horizontal dimension must be kept in tension with the vertical dimension. For instance, sermons sound moralistic when justification ceases to be about God's relationship to humanity and becomes a single minded focus on justice or reconciliation between humans. As noted above, John Howard Yoder can sound as though he is replacing justification as understood vertically with justice as understood horizontally. Here the personal relationship with Christ can be all but lost. James Childs, when he notes the close connection between justification and justice, stresses that the individual and the social aspects of God's justifying grace must stay in tension and both must be brought back to God's work.⁵⁵¹ If it is only the social aspects of justification that dominate, the sermon can move to current social notions of justice without actually noting how God's justification/justice is different from, say, North American notions of justice.

550. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 20.

551. James M. Childs Jr., *Preaching Justice: The Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 46.

Justification and Sanctification: Freedom to Love the Neighbour

For Martin Luther, justified persons – freed from the self interests that bind them – are free to love the neighbour. Free from justifying the self through good works and from striving to please God, society and the powers that be, the person is set free to love. The Christian is now free to use that energy that was once dedicated to self-preservation and self-improvement and to use that energy for the praise of God and service to the neighbour.⁵⁵² In the preface to his Romans commentary Luther writes,

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them....

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes us glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, Christians are ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown them this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.⁵⁵³

Far from being opposed to good works, as the caricature suggests, Luther was all for such works. In the context of the Holy Spirit, the freed person is empowered, and out of gratitude to God that person is now glad and happy to thank God and to serve others.

Part of the reason why Luther's understanding of ethics has been down-played, as Charles Campbell notes, is one of "disposition." For Luther, everyone is busy anyway, so busyness versus sloth is not the issue. Nor is the central issue that some are doing good and some are doing evil – although this does occupy some of his concern. What matters theologically is that the help to the neighbour is done out of a disposition of joy and love and not for hope of reward.⁵⁵⁴

552. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 25.

553. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Second ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, : Fortress Press, 2005), 104.

554. Charles L. Campbell, "Living Faith: Luther, Ethics, and Preaching," *Word and World* 10 (Fall 1990): 374–79.

Love of the neighbour has been an important theme in linking God's grace to Christian ethics in the New Homiletic. Richard Jensen, chastising Gerhard O. Forde for ignoring ethics entirely, pins his entire case for preaching on justice issues, not on the so-called third use of the law, but on the love of neighbour.⁵⁵⁵ Wilson includes the dispositions of thankfulness and risk in loving the neighbour when he notes that the "biblical text is conceived of primarily as a book of invitation to a life of risk on behalf of the neighbor and faith in a God who abundantly and graciously provides for all."⁵⁵⁶ Jacobsen and Kelly, as well as Childs also develop the love of neighbour as one way of placing Christian ethics in the context of God's grace.⁵⁵⁷ For the law/gospel school the love of neighbour, following Luther, is one of the primary routes to take in getting from God's grace to Christian ethics and then back again to God's grace. God has lifted the burden of self-justification and the result is that the believer can be free to love the neighbour.

When God's grace is not seen as primary, preaching the gospel in connection with the love of neighbour can go down a moralistic road. To look only at a given biblical character's love or action, or to command the love of neighbour can easily undercut the primary focus on the grace and love of God. The focus of the sermon, or the theme sentence of the sermon, is still about what God is doing in the text and in the world and not about what a given character is doing.⁵⁵⁸ It is only in the context of God's love, that Christians are free enough to love God and the neighbour.

Barbara Shires Blaisdell's sermon "Mother to Mother: Centered in a Circle of Need"⁵⁵⁹ is a well crafted sermon that struggles directly with the issue of how the uncurved can respond joyfully to the needs of others without turning love into command. Her sermon is based on Luke

555. Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, 75. See Forde's dismissal of ethics as a theological matter of importance in *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 190.

556. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 55.

557. James M. Childs Jr., "Enabling Grace," in *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice*, ed. Andre Resner Jr. (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003), 38; Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 113–15.

558. Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 157–58.

559. In Jana Childers, ed., *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 7–14.

17:12-19, the story of Jesus and the ten lepers. The preacher brings the listener into the circle of the lepers so that by the fifth minute into the sermon we are not simply looking into the leper colony, we are looking around to see who else is in *our group* of misfits. We are there with people we may not like such as “liberals ... and rednecks ... and bigots” asking them for help. Whether we want to admit it or not we are those who beg for mercy from Jesus from a distance, together with the rest of humanity. The healing itself is a little less than dramatic because the lepers, and we, are healed “on the way.” The nine go to do their duty to show themselves to the priest even though they have been healed, but the one comes back to thank Jesus. His thankfulness, and ours, becomes the focus of the last part of the sermon. It is “an awkward place,” the preacher admits, if she commands her listeners, given the text, to show spontaneous love to God and others. Rather than give one more “duty,” because gratitude cannot be commanded, she suggests that we “improvise” out of gratitude: “The next time you find yourself overwhelmingly grateful for a friendship you are in ... why not improvise some completely unnecessary and unexpected way to say thank you to her and to God.” In her last line she urges, “Offer beauty, beauty, beauty. Joy, joy, joy.”⁵⁶⁰

Blaisdell does not use the image of the curved self becoming uncurved but her sermon could very well do this to the listeners. Her sermon places the listener in the circle of those who are crying out for mercy. When healing takes place, the listener is standing tall and open to possibilities, beauty, and playful improvisation of gratitude.

Ecclesiology

Moving grace to the centre of the sermon may mean a new understanding of the church for Mennonites. Mennonites at times have been tempted to see the church as a pure body, as a gathering of those whose witness before the world needs to be spotless. Church discipline, or the ban, was used from the outset, at times in a loving way, and at times in a harsh way to remove

⁵⁶⁰. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 13–14.

those from the church who did not exemplify proper Christian behaviour.⁵⁶¹ Moving grace to the centre of the preached sermon will lead to an understanding of the church as a fallen gathering, a community that is paradoxically both saved and sinner at the same time. This will not diminish the call for discipleship; it can only make it more honest and strengthen it.

Scott Hendrix, in defense of the central place of ecclesiology for Luther, notes that for Luther, what goes for the individual also goes for the church. Hendrix sounds much like Bayer here. Ecclesiology and justification are inseparable for Luther. Bayer notes the same reality when he notes that the Spirit which finds the sinner is the same Spirit that gathers the church. That grace is for all equally, and that the community is bonded together not only in sin but in God's grace creates an open and non-judgmental community.⁵⁶² We could extend Hendrix's argument for other aspects of the faith. For instance, one could say that the Spirit, which empowers the individual for action, also empowers the church as a community for action and witness in the world.

What follows are three issues which are integral to the life of the church. These issues are chosen for their relevance to the present writer in his own Anabaptist-Mennonite context, but are likely relevant to other traditions and other preaching settings as well. Moralistic preaching sometimes treats the community as more important than individual concerns, overwhelms the listener with "the powers" out there and how they might be defeated, and tends toward a practice of prophetic preaching which equates the prophetic with present definitions of social action. The law/gospel school responds to these issues not by negating the concerns, but by placing all of these issues in light of God's grace.

The "Middle Term"

Charles Campbell and Richard Lischer argue for sermons that place the church as the

561. Sydney Penner, "The Centrality of Church Discipline in the Anabaptist View of the Church," in *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium: A Search for Identity*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000), 109–14.

562. Hendrix, "Open Community," 237.

middle term between the text and world.⁵⁶³ As noted above, the early New Homiletic was critiqued for its assumption that the individual is the primary middle term: the sermon primarily addresses the individual and his or her relationship with God. By arguing for the church as the middle term, rather than the individual or public life, Campbell and Lischer place the focus of the sermon on the moral formation of the church rather than on the potential experience of the gospel for individuals. Campbell argues that the church, not the individual needs of persons, should be on the mind of the preacher as she moves from text to sermon:

Rather than asking how texts connect with predetermined individual needs or how they connect with “general human experience” or how they are relevant to American society, preachers should quite consciously ask what the Spirit is saying to the *church* through the church’s scripture. The focus is not simply on what the text means but on how a particular passage of scripture functions to build up the people of God in and for the world.⁵⁶⁴

Lischer and Campbell defend the church as a legitimate “middle term” by arguing for the inherent social life of the New Testament church.⁵⁶⁵ Indeed the Bible is the child of God’s community and at the same time speaks to the community. Affirming the church as the middle term means that the preacher can seriously consider the church community as a place where people are empowered and are afforded opportunities to practice discipleship. When the middle term is “general human experience” or “American society” the church as God’s community, can certainly be left undernourished.⁵⁶⁶ But perhaps Campbell goes too far when he insists that the church should always stand as the middle term. A steady diet of the church being the middle term runs the risk of sidelining both the individual and society while the church hunkers down in its own little world. This can create a church which lives in isolation from the world, and perhaps lives in ignorance of sins it shares in common with all of humanity. As Jacobsen and Kelly note, “Christians have not graduated from humanity; nor has the church as the vanguard of redemption

563. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 229; Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 82.

564. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 230.

565. Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 76–79; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 221–31.

566. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 230.

graduated from creation.”⁵⁶⁷ The cross shows that “we are paradoxically broken and in relationship.”⁵⁶⁸ Perhaps David Buttrick captures a good law/gospel and sinner/saint ecclesiology when he notes that the church is broken but being formed by God at the same time. The church is “the being-saved community before Christ crucified.”⁵⁶⁹ The church is a sign in the world pointing to Christ but this is not the only location where God is working. God works in, around, and sometimes in spite of the church.⁵⁷⁰ Given the radical nature of God’s grace, a way forward might be to simply be clear about the given middle term that the preacher is using in each sermon. Cleophus LaRue for instance does not see any one fixed middle term but rather many as he ponders the various preaching domains of African American settings. Sometimes the middle term is the individual, as it would be for sermons that focus on piety, ethical decisions, or pastoral care. Other times the church is the middle term. Questions like, how persons love and treat each other in community, and what the church believes, are pondered in the sermon. Still other times the middle term has to do with racial and justice concerns. Here the middle term has to do with common concerns which the church and the society share.⁵⁷¹

The domains of preaching which LaRue identifies are particular to the African American setting, and so naturally each preacher and congregation might discern the middle terms that are a part of their reality. Nonetheless LaRue demonstrates how the middle term need not be limited to any one domain of life. The preacher need not limit herself to how God’s justifying and sanctifying grace is worked out in only one domain of life. As seen above, God’s grace claims all of life. Over time the congregation should hear the full range of where God’s justifying love is active and how the various domains where God is working are connected.

567. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 110.

568. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 112.

569. David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 240, 256–247.

570. David Buttrick, *Preaching the New and The Now* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 134.

571. Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 22–26.

Preaching against the Powers

When grace is central to the sermon, preaching with the “powers and principalities” (Romans 8:38; Ephesians 1:21) in mind highlights the reconciling work that God is doing in the world rather than Christian resistance. In simple terms, preaching against the powers can end up being more about the overwhelming trouble in the world than about the good news of the gospel.

The powers here are understood as structural realities of life such as institutions and ideologies, or any kind of “ism” or forces that make up and even control daily life. Charles Campbell characterizes preaching as a fundamental practice of the church in engaging the powers. Here the church’s stance toward society is primarily one of resistance against the powers.⁵⁷²

It is notable that Jacobsen and Kelly, as well as Childs and others, can write about the same cosmic realities that Campbell does, but they use the terms “powers” and “resistance” sparingly, if at all.⁵⁷³ With powers language Campbell seems to have drawn a thick line between the church and the world. But a thinner line might be necessary. When preaching with the powers in mind it is wise to note that the powers dwell as much in the church, and even within the individual Christian, as they do “out there.” Again Buttrick is helpful here. While he claims that resisting the powers was central in Jesus’ ministry, and that resistance continues in the life of the church,⁵⁷⁴ he also notes the church cannot dismiss all of the powers or structures in society as inherently evil. Social orders and institutions provide both order and foundations for life to flourish.⁵⁷⁵

Preaching in the context of the powers helpfully points the preacher to structural and cosmic realities that are part of daily life and a part of the larger fabric of faith. Campbell’s notion of preaching that “exposes” the powers and at the same time “envisions” God’s new

572. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 69.

573. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 105–10; Childs Jr., *Preaching Justice*, 37.

574. David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 49–55.

575. Buttrick, *Preaching the New and The Now*, 73.

world, grounded in the cross and resurrection, sounds more like law/gospel theology.⁵⁷⁶ The law is a mirror that exposes sin on all levels. Grace is God's vision for a new world and often is at odds with the world as it is. At the same time humility is needed. Those same powers of destruction which are "out there" are also alive and well and dividing the church, families, and the local community, and the preacher himself. Awareness of one's own complicity is crucial.⁵⁷⁷ But what is more crucial is that God in Christ has overcome the powers of darkness. This is still the sound that needs to be heard the loudest in the preached sermon.

Prophetic Preaching

Prophetic preaching can easily go down the road to moralizing. Harangues or self-righteous lists of angry demands have been seen as a truncated view of prophetic preaching in New Homiletics circles for some time.⁵⁷⁸ Prophetic preaching at its best can imaginatively and even humorously name sin and wounds for what they are.⁵⁷⁹ The prophetic word is an exposing word, bringing a word of judgment, but it never stays there when the gospel is viewed as a priority. The prophetic word does not come in anger but rather with pastoral compassion, when the preacher names how God is inviting the church to join in with what God is already doing in the world.⁵⁸⁰

At times prophetic preaching has been understood as addressing only what is "out there" in society, as though the church is a righteous and central place from which social advocacy originates. Here the church is seen as against what is going on in society, sometimes without regard to for its own participation in the very sins or powers which are named as "out there." Walter Brueggemann, though, clearly notes that prophetic preaching is not fundamentally about social activism or social advocacy. Social radicalism for its own sake is "without nourishment,

576. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 105, 119.

577. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

578. Arthur Van Seters, ed., *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology & Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 251.

579. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 119.

580. Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching as a Social Act*, 253. Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 119.

without any sanctions deeper than human courage and good intentions.”⁵⁸¹ The beginning and end of the prophetic lies in God and in worship of God:

It is in receiving and not in grasping, in inheriting and not possessing, in praising and not seizing. It is in knowing that the initiative has passed from our hands and we are safer for it....The newness from God is the only serious source of energy.⁵⁸²

Here the prophetic always goes back to God’s goodness and God’s empowering grace. Art Van Seters, along the same lines, notes that the prophetic always leads back to God’s creative and redeeming work.⁵⁸³

Far from being a lone ranger, the prophetic preacher or the prophetic church is not alone, but is intimately dependent on God’s grace. Prophetic preaching, taking law/gospel theology seriously, is always done in the context of the brokenness, not only of the world, but of the church, and also the preacher herself. Humility is required as the prophetic preacher and the prophetic church recognize that the same justifying and reconciling grace that is needed in the world is needed in the domain of the church and with the individual Christian.

A biblical and God-centred definition of prophetic preaching is essential for preachers so that the sermon does not become watered down by current and even faddish social concerns. Indeed social concern is crucial in preaching, but it is social concern which rises out of the God’s Word, not out of the latest human concern. In this way, prophetic preaching is pro-active, rather than simply reactive to what is dictated by a crisis in a given time and place.⁵⁸⁴ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, an Anabaptist of the Church of the Brethren tradition, offers a clear definition of preaching which contrasts social ethics preaching with biblical prophetic preaching:

In accordance with the prophetic tradition of Israel and the ministry of Jesus Christ as recorded in Scripture, prophetic preaching may be understood as divinely inspired speech enlivened by the Holy Spirit in the gathered community of faith. Prophetic preaching proclaims God’s Word from within the Christian tradition against all that threatens God’s reconciling intention for humanity and for all that creates and sustains a

581. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 8.

582. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 78.

583. Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching as a Social Act*, 252.

584. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, “God’s Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew, and Bible* (Telford, Pennsylvania: Cascadia Publishing House, 2003), 78.

*vital and necessary ministry of compassion to neighbors near and far. Because it is not exclusively moral exhortation or predictions regarding future events, prophetic preaching envisions past, present and future concerns within the context of the reign of God realized in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.*⁵⁸⁵

One of the themes that runs through the above topics on ecclesiology, is that of the sinner/saint reality of individual Christians of the church. It has been made clear here that whether preaching in a prophetic mode or with the powers-that-be in mind that preachers need recognize their own sins as well as the sins of the church. The destroying powers that are “out there” can also be alive and well in the church and within the individual. The prophetic, as has been stated, needs to be spoken as much for the benefit of the church as for the benefit of the world. One way that preachers can get in touch with this sinner/saint paradox in the church is to attend to the topics of confession and pardon. Confession and pardon as topics and as practices in the church can go a long way to help the church recognize its own failings. Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian Thomas Finger notes that those in the believer’s church traditions, because of the strong discipleship emphasis and strong emphasis that the Spirit transforms, sometimes believe and expect that they have “a higher degree of sanctification than Lutherans or Reformed.”⁵⁸⁶ Some Christians can actually think they are better than others! Taking confession and pardon seriously as acts of worship can help to reveal that sin is present in the life of the church, that God forgives sin, and that sin actually links Christians with those “out there” whom we like to critique for being more sinful than we are. More than thirty years ago Marlene Kropf and others introduced, among other practices, regular confession and words of pardon to Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. Marlene Kropf:

We've enlarged the role of praise and confession in worship, largely because of the way these acts of worship have been ordered in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, but also because we've discovered a deeper need to recognize and name who God is and who we are in worship. The altar-call of past generations has been transformed into a variety of rituals

585. Wilhelm, “God’s Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” 77. Her emphasis.

586. Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol 2. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1989), 214.

of response.⁵⁸⁷

The Fall 2002 edition of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, a publication of Mennonite Church Canada and USA, features the theme of confession in a number of articles and sermons. This recent wave of recognition of human sin and God's grace in confession and pardon in the North American Mennonite setting is one avenue where God's grace can be found in the centre of worship, preaching, and life.

Eschatology

Moving grace to the centre of the Mennonite sermon will take the metaphysical pressure off to make history turn out right. Both Yoder and Bayer, each in their own way, proclaim that God, and not the church, brings about the kingdom.

Eschatology in the context of law/gospel theology takes seriously the promise of the kingdom to come, which has been inaugurated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Eschatology both affirms that God is bringing the future, and at the same time grants a picture of what that future will look like as a way to give direction to the Christian life.

There is a past, present and future reality to the gospel, although Bayer as has been noted, sees these realities as intermingled. Nonetheless eschatology looks to the future but brings that future to bear on the present as well as the past. The gospel has come in fullness in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In this way the gospel is a past event. But the gospel is at the same time a present event when and where the gospel is proclaimed in Word, sacrament, or deed. But this is not all. The outworking of the cross and resurrection continues to unfold: God is bringing and will bring about the new creation, which, as Luther noted, was a return to Eden. Eschatology understood in this way is rooted in the cross and resurrection and looks forward to the fulfillment of what God has already done in Christ, and what God has yet in store.

587. Thomas, "Q & A with Marlene Kropf," 35.

While the Christian waits, whether for the kingdom or the second coming of Christ, the Christian lives in an in-between place, or between two eras. The old sphere of sin has been vanquished but its power still holds sway. Even though the death and the resurrection of Christ have forever exposed individual and corporate sin, and at the same time proclaimed and enacted the first fruits of the new kingdom, suffering, sin, and violence still exist. In the midst of this period the word which comes as law/gospel reminds Christians that although they are both sinners and saints and witness brutality on the one hand and generous love and beauty on the other, God will keep God's promises and will bring the good news to fruition in time.⁵⁸⁸ In the midst of this paradoxical life, the gospel arrives here and there, providing hope for suffering and direction for how to live life in the in-between time.

The very notion of “justification by grace *through faith*,” as Jacobsen and Kelly note, has an eschatological and “already but not yet” ring to it.⁵⁸⁹ Faith itself rests on what is not yet seen or heard in full but what is expected in light of God's promises. The “already but not yet” has justification at the centre and recognizes reality in all its brutality and sinfulness. At the same time justification points to what God is bringing; God will yet justify:

What we are promised is a justified destiny, but what we are now is *simil iustus et peccator* What we are promised is the reign of God, but what we now see is the rule of humanly devised institutions. What we are promised is a renewed creation, but what we see is a world in desperate need of renewal. What we are promised is the Savior of the cosmos, but what we see now is the crucified Jesus.⁵⁹⁰

For Jacobsen and Kelly, the word “promise” ties gospel, eschatology, and ethics together. The Christian has a hope-filled faith, given God's promise of the eventual redemption of all of creation. Sealed in the cross and resurrection is a promise that sustains life in the present day.⁵⁹¹ A promise, though, does not assume an immediate solution.⁵⁹² In the same way that law/gospel preaching is not a problem–solution scheme, but much more complex than this, so the gospel

588. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 19.

589. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 19.

590. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 19.

591. Childs Jr., “Enabling Grace,” 43.

592. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 19.

here is defined not as solution but rather as promise: the promise of God. The promise does not give entirely clear answers in the way humans demand answers; rather, directions are given. God has already revealed the end, even though through a glass dimly.⁵⁹³ As Lowry might suggest, the promise allows the Christian to lean into the future which God is bringing.

Knowing that God will fulfill all of God's promises puts Christian action in perspective. The Christian is not called to bring about the kingdom of God through social theory or social activism, but this does not mean that Christians cannot be active in making life better in the here and now for all of humanity and God's creation. The point is that the future is in God's capable hands. In the meantime the Christian is not without directions for how to live. But what are those directions for how the Christian might live in anticipation of what God is bringing?

Thomas Long notes that eschatological hope for Christians has at various points turned into optimism and projects which suggest that individuals or the church can actually build or bring about the kingdom of God. Here Christians are active but eschatology is reduced to optimism and secular notions of progress.⁵⁹⁴ Preaching should neither be voicing hope in human progress, nor placing hope in an abstract future. Rather, Long calls for a "future-perfect tense" of faith, with the affirmation that "Christ is Risen!" and "Jesus is Lord!"... exercises tension upon the present tense, generating both judgment and promise, creating the possibility of ethical action in the world, sustained by hope."⁵⁹⁵ As both judgment and promise are heard from God's future, ethical action remains hopeful and rooted in God.

What are the directions given from the direction of God's future? Of course there are biblical resources which directly speak to what God's future looks like. Isaiah pictures plenty of free food and drink for those who have none (Isaiah 55:1). Jesus speaks of mourners being comforted and the meek inheriting the earth (Matthew 5:4-5). Paul, who seems to be constantly wrestling with how to deal with suffering and moral dilemmas in the period between the two

593. Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 112.

594. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, 117.

595. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, 123.

eons or spheres, projects the image of the church that works like a body (I Corinthians 12:12-31). Texts like these which envision what life might be like do not demand obedience as much as they grant a vision for what life could look like.

While the early New Homiletic over-emphasized the parable, the parable – with its reversal, surprise, shock, and reorientation – evokes new ways to see both the present and the future which God is bringing. It is good for preachers to be tempered by some of the criticism which Richard Lischer and others have levelled at preaching the parables; however, when properly connected to the larger story of the cross and resurrection, the parable still holds great promise for preaching grace. Parables continue to hold promise for evoking an experiential view of what God is bringing about and how the Christian is called to lean into the future.⁵⁹⁶

Both the character of Jesus and the plots in which he is found hold promise for what God's future looks like.⁵⁹⁷ But Jesus' life is not something to be simply mimicked. At the same time though, the life of Jesus in the context of his death and resurrection, as Buttrick suggests, shows the "shape" of what the kingdom looks like.⁵⁹⁸ Campbell seems to suggest with his notion of following Jesus "from a distance" that the question should not be, "What would Jesus do?" but rather, "What would a disciple do?"⁵⁹⁹ Following Jesus is about following and not mimicking for the simple reason that Jesus is the Messiah and we are not: we are broken humanity. At the

596. Eugene L. Lowry, "Narrative Preaching," in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, exec. ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 201–03.

597. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 172. Campbell, following Hans Frei, insists on character over plot when looking to the Gospels. Campbell is correcting the strong emphasis on plot in the early years of the New Homiletic and is calling for the priority of character; namely, the character of Jesus rendered in the Gospels. While it is helpful to note the difference between character and plot, they are likely best taken together rather than one over the other. For Campbell, the character of Christ is of course connected to character or virtue ethics and the building up of the church. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 219, 226, 240, 244. See also Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching and Ethics*, 43–58 on the issue of virtue and character ethics. Van Seters helpfully distinguishes between virtue ethics as understood by the Greeks and virtue ethics as understood in the Christian church. For the former, the cultivation of virtue is a human endeavor, while for the latter virtue is understood as originating in the Spirit. "Christians understand moral character is rooted in a doctrine of human nature shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.... Our freedom lies not in our choices but in our identity; we are free in Christ." (48)

598. Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ*, 49, 54–55.

599. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 212–13.

same time though, Jesus embodies the shape of the kingdom to come. In this way Christians can look to his ministry, stories, and actions as they negotiate life in this in-between time.

Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Surviving Eden" based on Genesis 3:6 serves as a good example of a sermon which focuses on eschatology.⁶⁰⁰ The problem which Adam and Eve had after they ate of the tree is similar to the issues Christians face in the midst of their ambition, appetite, daring, and disobedience. Like Adam we wonder why we do these things. We also join in their regret. Taylor does not say it directly but her sermon communicates that, like Adam and Eve, Christians live seemingly in two eras or spheres. We live in Eden where God dwells ("in Christ") but the tree (sin) is always calling. The preacher tells an old legend about how Adam and Eve fasted and despaired for 83 days. But even there angels came to them to cool them. Finally Adam and Eve start to take gifts of food and lessons on how to live from God. God proclaims love to them through an angel, "Fear not ... the God who created you will strengthen you." God has helped them put their lives back together but they are scared, and they look like us: "It is a world full of chips, and dents and scars. Even where we have glued it back together you can still see the cracks ..."⁶⁰¹ Near the end of the sermon Taylor notes that God keeps creating, recreating, and putting us back together "so that we are never ruined, never entirely, and never for good." The final word goes to an image of Christians sharing communion. The broken bread reminds us that God continues to feed, clothe, and dwell with us on this side of Eden "until he can bring us home."⁶⁰² This sermon brings God to the listener as they live in this place between the old and new age. God continues to issue effective promises even to those in Christ who continually fail.

Conclusion

Taking God's grace as central in the sermon means that Christ is first of all Saviour before he is model for life, that justification and sanctification are both vertical and horizontal

600. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1993), 168–74.

601. Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 173.

602. Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 174.

realities, that the church is made up of those who are sinner and saint at the same time – constantly in need of grace, and that Christians are not here to build the kingdom but to witness to God who will surely do this work.

Without God’s grace, Jesus can be preached as though he is simply a teacher of morality. Without God’s grace, justification can be preached only as a horizontal reality, as though God has little to do with the forgiveness of personal sins and the anguish of individual souls. Without God’s grace, the church can become a community which exists solely as a staging ground for resistance to the evils of the world without noticing its own evils. When God’s grace is not central in the sermon, focus on the future can be reduced to a human optimism which suggests that we can all “pull through this together.”

A Preaching Course: Moving God’s Grace to the Centre of the Mennonite Sermon

Below are several components of a theology of preaching course which could be taught at a place like Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. While this project has the Mennonite church in North America at its heart, the concern here for moving grace to the centre of the sermon, as has been noted above, is a concern in many traditions. The moralistic or anthropocentric sermon in homiletical literature is not seen as a problem in one tradition but seen broadly as an issue even in those traditions which have stressed God’s grace and sovereignty. Thus, while this course design is set in a Mennonite seminary and compares Mennonite and Lutheran theologies and homiletics, there would be ways to adapt the major theme, that of moving grace to the centre of the sermon, for other traditions and seminaries.

The following course is designed to be a second-level course. I would want the students to have some experience in preaching as well as some theological study before tackling this advanced comparative work. While moving grace to the centre of the sermon needs to be stressed in the introductory preaching course, in this second-level course there is more time and space to get into specific issues. It would be my hope that this course could be registered as both in the Church and Ministry department as well as the Theology department.

The goal in this course is not to turn Mennonites into Lutherans but there is a strong desire on my part to study the Lutheran tradition, and especially its grace tradition, in some depth. The caricature that Mennonites hold discipleship dear and that Lutherans hold grace dear has some ring of truth to it as we have seen, but this begs for further study, not caricature. As this study has shown, God's grace and Christian discipleship, while in tension with each other within both traditions, are not oil and water. Studying the way that Mennonites and Lutherans do theological ethics in scholarly work and in the sermon should strengthen the faith and witness of both traditions and beyond.

It may seem to the postmodern student that to compare Mennonite and Lutheran theology and preaching is a topic for historians and not for pulpit practitioners. Are not denominations crumbling? Are not we "borrowing" in a postmodern era from each other so that denomination ceases to matter? Are we not discovering new language for both 'grace' and 'ethics'? True, Protestant denominations in North America and Europe are shrinking; and yes, we are all "borrowers" to some degree. Still, in order to move forward to whatever the church or denominations look like in the future, it is still crucial to understand our past, and to understand the legacies that continue to live in overt and covert ways in the church local or catholic. Further, grace and discipleship, and the dynamics between them, are crucial to all Christians. Understanding how God's grace and Christian discipleship have been weaved together and debated in and between any denomination is worth study.

Selections from the syllabus for "Grace and Discipleship in Theology and Preaching" is as follows and uses the template suggested at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. What follows here is a course description, course objectives, a bibliography of required books. I then proceed with characteristics of a grace centred sermon with analysis of five sermons to be read in class. I conclude with a course schedule.

Course Description, Objectives, and Bibliography

Title: Grace and Discipleship in Theology and Preaching

Description: In this course students will carefully analyze Lutheran and Mennonite views of discipleship and grace with a view to preaching which takes both Christian discipleship and God's grace seriously in the preached sermon. The theological ethics of Lutheran Oswald Bayer, and Mennonite John Howard Yoder, with their interlocutors, will be explored with a view to understanding how these two traditions seek to understand God's unmerited grace and Christ's call to discipleship. Issues arising from the New Homiletic such as the form of the sermon, the effect or "Christ-event" of the sermon, theologies of preaching, and the difference between teaching and proclamation will be explored with a view to preaching that places Christian ethics in the context of God's unmerited and generous grace. While the systematic theological topics of grace and discipleship will be examined here, ancillary topics will include justification and sanctification, as well as ecclesiology and eschatology.

Objectives: Students will ...

- gain a general understanding of the similarities of and differences between two theological traditions, Lutheran and Anabaptist-Mennonite. It is in comparison that we learn to understand our own tradition as well as the tradition of the other
- have a critical and practical understanding of how grace and discipleship function in Lutheran and Anabaptist-Mennonite traditions
- be able to preach out of a rich understanding of both God's unmerited grace and Jesus' call to discipleship
- be able to distinguish between teaching and proclamation and be able to demonstrate this in the preached sermon

Required texts (with annotated bibliography and in order of class schedule):

Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus. Vicit Agnus Noster*. Rev.ed. William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994.

Here the case is made that Jesus Christ's life and words matter in connection to his cross and resurrection. Yoder shows with a reading of Luke, Paul and John's Revelation that Jesus' call to discipleship is not an added notion to salvation but organic to the biblical account. This defense of Christian pacifism does not call the Christian community to sectarian withdrawal but to action in the political and social realm. A radical work when it was first written in 1972, this volume contains epilogues to most chapters where the author responds to critics and clarifies his thinking. Mennonites saw Anabaptist theology in this work, but it was written primarily from Reformed sources and was meant to appeal to both evangelicals and main-line Protestants. Students will be asked to go beyond this work as interests in Yoder dictate. I can help you find what you need.

Greiser, David B. and Michael A. King, eds. *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew and Bible*. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2003.

This collection of essays in the area of homiletics is the most recent collection by contemporary Anabaptist believers in North America. Here we discover some characteristics of the sermon in the early Anabaptist era and a cursory history of preaching in Mennonite settings in the last several centuries. Topics common in the New

Homiletic such as hermeneutics, biblical preaching, forms of the sermon, collaborative preaching, prophetic preaching, theology in the sermon, and preaching in multicultural settings are examined from an Anabaptist or Mennonite point of view.

Bayer, Oswald. *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003.

This short volume gives an overview of Bayer's reading of Luther on justification and sanctification. Treating such topics as the nexus of self-justifications which humans live, God's *promisso*, the passive human, the uncurved Christian life, serving the neighbour, and Christian ethics in light of the ten commandments and the orders of creation. Students will be asked to read select chapters from other works by Bayer depending on their interests.

Jacobsen, David Schnasa, and Robert Allen Kelly. *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2009.

Here a Methodist and a Lutheran offer a theological and practical book where justification by grace through faith serves as the theological starting point for preaching in the "common places" of funerals, weddings, stewardship, injustice, and public crises.

Wilson, Paul Scott. *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

This is Paul Wilson's latest and most substantial work on the character of proclamation in connection with teaching. This work develops the notion of sub-genres of proclamation within the sermon with plenty of examples from sermons past and present. Here the student will be able to clarify the differences between the sub-genres of trouble (eg. condemnation, lament) and grace (eg. doxology, testimony, celebration).

Comment on Course Bibliography

The above required texts would be supplemented by a number of other books and articles in the course bibliography. For instance, Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* needs to read together with other voices in the larger Mennonite debate on discipleship. Thus the full course bibliography would include select chapters and larger works of scholars such as A. James Riemer, Ted Koontz, C. Arnold Snyder and Marlene Kropf. Also, Bayer's work needs to be read together with other Lutheran scholars who are doing theological ethics. For instance, the above noted collection of essays by Foster R. McCurley on social ministries and Brian K. Peterson's collection on preaching from the Evangelical branch of the Lutheran church in North America may be helpful to place Bayer's work in broader Lutheran context.

Rationale for Course Sermons

In addition to course texts, the bibliography, and class discussions, the students will learn by listening to sermons in the company of each other. In five classes and perhaps more, the instructor will lead in a “group reading” of a sermon followed by discussion. Here the students are given the opportunity to hear a sermon which has grace at the center, but at the same time includes important information and encouragement for Christian discipleship. From the biblical, theological, and homiletical discussion above, the characteristics of a sermon where grace is at the centre are as follows:

1) It is biblical. Aside from the issue whether the sermon is about the text or about the gospel, and setting aside interpretations of what a biblical sermon is, it is the biblical account which is central for the Christian church and for preaching.

2) It places God at the centre of the action rather than humans. The triune God is the primary actor in the sermon and is the one who brings good news to humans. There is a difference between God and human beings and this needs to be made clear. There is some risk taken in this sermon because the preacher dares to name the grace that God is doing in the world in the present time.

3) It moves in such a way that tension leads to the surprise of God’s grace. This sermon has a lively sense of tension and moves to a place where the listener can experience the grace of God. The tension often present here, whether stated directly or indirectly, is the tension between human sin and God’s goodness. Here sin, brokenness, and suffering in the text and in present life are explored in some specific way and to some depth, so that the listener can better hear the good news that the triune God brings in this specific situation. The tension leading to climax is not simply problem/solution logic but rather law/grace or cross/resurrection logic: the grace of God is not automatic but comes in surprise, or in some way that is not expected. More, this grace comes in person. The grace of God is a promise spoken to *you* (singular and plural) and to *me*.

4) It has direct proclamation of God's grace. This sermon may include direct and indirect ways of speaking about discipleship and grace, but it will at some point proclaim God's grace to the listener. The gospel is made present in this sermon. While keeping grace at the centre of the sermon is crucial it is not enough to say as a final word to the congregation, "God gave manna to his people in the wilderness." This is a past tense comment which gives information about people in the bible but does not proclaim the good news to the listener. One could say, "Just as God was with the people in the desert, so God is with us." This comes closer to the now of the listener but is not direct address. Proclamation is more like, "God loves you and is feeding you." Even better though is first person to second person address where the preacher dares to speak for God: "I love you. I am feeding you."

5) In this sermon, discipleship or moral teaching, is always placed in the context of God's grace. In this light, it is best if the sermon does not end with moral exhortation or conditional clauses but keeps the end for God's word of grace. This sermon may have direct or indirect ways of dealing with ethical issues, but the preacher who speaks a word directly must be fully aware of the deep connections between the pastoral and the prophetic, and of course the reality that the words of the preacher are always spoken in the context of a strong relationship. There can be a fine line between the moralistic sermon and the sermon that treats moral issues or discipleship in the context of God's grace. The watchword here is to keep God and God's actions at the centre.

Analysis of Sermons which Place God's Grace at the Centre

The sermons noted below do not conform in every way to all of the characteristics above, but they will have many of the traits that are noted here. While not perfectly conforming to the above these sermons can be used as teaching tools for the class room where the students are keen on moving grace to the centre of the sermon.

"The Talking God and the Speechless Prophet" by Allan Rudy-Froese

1) This sermon comes from and displays a close reading of Jonah 3:1-4:3. While this sermon narratively moves through the story in this text, references are made to Jonah's lack of

utterance to God in chapter one, his prayer in chapter two, and the silence we hear from Jonah at the very end of chapter four. Throughout we hear God speaking to Jonah and through Jonah to the people of Nineveh; but we hear little from Jonah, except his angry dialogue with God in chapter 4. The central theme is that God is the broker of God's love and not the preacher. God will save the Ninevites with, without, beside, or in spite of the preacher - yet the preacher is needed.

2) God is at the center of this sermon. It is made clear throughout the sermon that God continues to address and use Jonah even though Jonah is reluctant to speak back, and reluctant to love the Ninevites. For the entirety of the sermon, the God who addresses with promise is speaking not only to Jonah and to the Ninevites, but also to the listeners. It is clear that it is by God's mercy that the Ninevites are given new lives that are free from the violence that was "in their hands." God gets the last word in dialogue, and this word of grace is now directed to the listener.

3) There is a lively sense of tension in this sermon between the God who addresses and the prophet-preacher who is at worst silent before God, and at best inconsistent in his response to God. On the simple level of speech the introduction takes the listener to the very common and dissonant experience of making a request and hearing nothing in return. The sermon plays with the tensive pattern of address and no response throughout. Irony reigns in Jonah three where even the Ninevites address God in repentance while Jonah is reluctant to speak to God. On a deeper level, the sin of humanity's lack of response to God, or "atheism" as Bayer would put it, is in contrast to the God who continues to address not only us but our enemies in mercy and grace. The tension between God's loving address and our reluctance to speak a word back continues to the very end. Jonah is silent at the end of chapter four and has been silent for three thousand years. Yet God continues to address in love. God comes to us in an address of love, and what is our response?

4) This sermon proclaims God's grace directly at the very end of the sermon: "God loves you and is calling you. God is addressing you in love." This proclamation does not stand in a vacuum but has been developing for the entire sermon. From the introduction to the body of the sermon, there are many points where a speech is made in love and a response is awaited. God's love is seen from the first in the parent's love and understanding of the child who may not respond verbally. God's love is shown in the past tense – God loved Jonah and the Ninevites. The playful fusion of the repenting Ninevites comes closer to home for the listeners. What if God's mercy came to us in this way? What would it mean for our lives? The love of God comes still closer in the statements about the love of God being so much broader than a love "for us, for you."

5) Discipleship is treated within the context of God's grace in this sermon. Throughout the sermon, being a disciple is characterized directly and indirectly by simply responding to the God who addresses us. A disciple finds his or her identity in being in conversation with God and heeding the call to go on that adventure which God has for us. Also, the Ninevites who are now celebrating God's deliverance serve as examples of what a response and thankful attitude to God's grace looks like. Here I have fused the ancient Ninevites with a current North American setting. The Ninevites have turned from the violence that is in their hands:

Gangs that once fought with each other are melting their weapons into garden tools. Neighbours who were once arguing have bulldozed the fence down and are having a karaoke party. Dysfunctional families are wall papering together. The local Mennonite Mediation services have been closed down. There is no more conflict resolution to do.

Here the weapons turned to garden tools, the karaoke party, the family that is wallpapering together and the "closed" sign at the Mediation Services office offer images of what God wants not only for us but for the world. While a picture is offered of what a morally proper universe looks like, the biggest moral issue is still how humans live in relationship with God, a God who was, is, and will address us with love.

“Swept Upstream” by Eugene Lowry ⁶⁰³

1) This is a biblical sermon. Lowry stays close to the narrative of Mark 14:1-10. The listener hears a more or less continuous story about the woman who anoints Jesus’ head with costly ointment at Simon’s house and the conversation which then unfolds between Jesus and those who were there who questioned the cost of this present action. Lowry directly includes the listener in the central bind of the sermon: “And we have to be shocked too, because their logic was quite in order: Nine months’ salary for one brief moment of dramatic show - when human need lies all around?!”⁶⁰⁴ She has shown love, and yet there is good argument to be made about the cost of her action. Interspersed with the continuous narrative, Lowry includes a set of rhetorical questions, and insights/stories about celebration which press the point in the narrative that “Celebration, after all, has a mind of its own.”⁶⁰⁵ Even after the gospel climax of celebration is explained and experienced, Lowry keeps the narrative going with another question: why is she to be remembered and not Jesus? Is this not his memorial? In the very last lines Lowry deals with the question and the greatest gospel of all: “And Jesus - Jesus, although facing certain death, yet unselfconsciously prepared to celebrate *her* impending life. And that made all the difference in the world that night. *And it still does.*”⁶⁰⁶

2) God is at the centre of the action in the person of Jesus Christ. Conflict is highlighted at the beginning of the sermon, not only in the impending death of Jesus, but also in the woman’s breaking of decorum with an expensive gift. But Jesus soon takes over. His words, while they continue to be a riddle for some time, provide the focus of the sermon. Jesus is *for* celebration of new life and “celebration logic” is not easy to understand. Lowry unpacks the meaning of Jesus’ words for the balance of the sermon, still keeping the biblical narrative flow. In the last line of the sermon, as noted above, Jesus celebrates her new life and celebrates our new lives as well.

603. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 89–93.

604. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 91.

605. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 91–92.

606. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 93.

This sermon leaves us with God celebrating the new lives that are continually being transformed in Christ.

3) There is a lively sense of tension, or even several tensions that keep the story moving to the place where the listener experiences God's grace. Lowry presses the point in his storytelling that her costly action is indeed an action to be critical about. Is it not true that this money should go to the poor? Does she not go overboard? We are indeed in a bind, but in a close telling of Jesus' words we find that Jesus did so much for her that this was her only response: "She had been at the end of her rope and Jesus offered her more; She had been up against the wall and Jesus moved the wall; She was utterly without hope—until Jesus come along with new life."⁶⁰⁷ Now the listener is ready to see the incredible gift given to her and that her response is understandable in a certain light: "Celebration "has a mind of its own ... and demands an utterly different set of behaviors."⁶⁰⁸ Yet the gospel does not solve all of the present issues as though this is a clear problem to solution gospel. Clearly, some still do not want to celebrate. Also, Jesus is still facing certain death. But even here, Jesus offers new life. Even in his "certain death" he celebrates "her impending life."⁶⁰⁹

4) This sermon has a number places where the preacher comes close to proclamation, but proclamatory statements are made in the past-tense. However, many of the words that Lowry places on Jesus' lips sound as much for those in the text as for those in listening to the sermon. Lowry puts Jesus' words in a paraphrase: "If you can't join the celebration, leave me alone."⁶¹⁰ This is placed in the present tense as it is Jesus' words to the protestors of the action of the woman. Yet the listener may hear these words directly by this time in the sermon. This line is a proclamation of trouble, placing a direct judgement on those in the text and the listener of the sermon. At the end of the sermon he comes close to direct proclamation. The word is for the

607. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 92–93.

608. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 91.

609. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 93.

610. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 92.

listener but indirect: “And Jesus – Jesus, although facing certain *death*, yet unselfconsciously prepared to celebrate *her* impending life. And that made all the difference in the world that night. *And it still does.*”⁶¹¹ This last sentence links the world of the text to the now, but does not directly proclaim a word from God in the first-person. Still the line is provocative and effective.

5) Issues of Christian discipleship are treated in the context of Jesus’ invitation to celebration, even if the ointment offends some. The call to discipleship here is a call to celebrate with all of those who have found new life. Those who do not “get” celebration should reconsider how much God has in fact given them. Those who do not “get” celebration are those who may be having a hard time with those who break convention in love their for Jesus. This sermon has a personal and a social dimension. We need not be jealous of our brothers and sisters who bring great offerings and dramatic stories of thanksgiving to the table. God loves us all and wants to us to join in the celebration.

“Mother to Mother: Centered in a Circle of Need” by Barbara Shires Blaisdell⁶¹²

1) This is a biblical sermon. Blaisdell takes us through the story in Luke 17:12-19 with many stops along the way to include the listener and to comment on the text in light of its own historical setting as well as our setting. Almost immediately she places the listener in the circle of the needy lepers who call from a distance, “Lord have mercy on us. Help us!”⁶¹³ The listeners are drawn into that group of those who need something from God, and are taken to Jesus who heals but in an odd way. Jesus has not been to pastoral care class and instead of saying a tender word, tells us sternly to “go.” Sometimes the word of healing comes in ways we do not want to hear, and it happens slowly when we are on the way. But one person comes back to say thanks, while the others go on their way to be certified by the proper authorities. Jesus calls the one who came to give thanksgiving “whole” because he risked a spontaneous and unrehearsed thanksgiving.

611. Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 93.

612. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 7–14.

613. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 8.

Blaisdell tells the biblical story and weaves our lives within the text, giving us the right amount of information about then and just the right amount of direct analogy to the present to keep us in the narrative of God's odd but sure healing.

2) God's grace is at the centre of this narrative sermon. At the very beginning we are wondering if this will be so, for she begins with the work of mothering, fathering, doing good and "making a difference in the world."⁶¹⁴ But before we know it, the preacher has placed us in that circle of lepers who cry to Jesus for mercy. Regardless of how busy we are, even busy with being servants of God, we are still needy – we are afraid, guilty, scared, and struggle with difficult decisions all of the time. But thanks to God we are welcome in this circle of imperfect people who need help, who need healing. We are also sent by Jesus and are healed on the way. God's healing in our lives may not be instant but often happens "on the way." The one who comes back to Jesus does not come back out of obligation but out of great thanksgiving. God does not require this of us – God will heal us anyway – but we are made whole by giving beauty back to God. The wild idea of turning around to thank God is not an obligation but an offering back to a God who does wonders.

3) There is a lively sense of tension in this story. First, there is the tension she creates between affirming our wanting to be good, and then immediately placing us in the circle of the needy: we want to do much, but we are also needy. What is more, she takes us further into this circle where many of the people we may not like are present: "I hope you don't mind who else is with you in that group."⁶¹⁵ After establishing us in this circle of misfits who await Jesus' healing she has brings us to Jesus with the lepers for this odd healing. Jesus does not heal on the spot but sends us to be certified. Healing takes a while. The gospel is not magic, but happens in ways we do not expect. The preacher leads us into a third tension in the text, where the one returns to give thanks and nine are missing in action. What is this about? We are invited to improvise, to be

614. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 7.

615. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 9.

open to spontaneous thanksgiving. Blaisdell is direct about the tension between doing the thing that Jesus commands (law) and returning to give thanks (grace). At the end of the sermon she notes directly that she wants to share something of what this improvised thankfulness looks like but does not want to turn it into a new command, for gratitude cannot be commanded, but examples are appropriate. She then shares some rather ambiguous examples and closes with encouragement to “Offer beauty, beauty, beauty.”⁶¹⁶

4) This sermon contains direct proclamation in the form of invitation. What the sermon is *doing* at the beginning is inviting us into the circle of God’s grace. The preacher invites us into the circle of those who cry for mercy: “So, if there is any sadness pressing in your heart today, you belong in that circle. If you have some guilt that you cannot seem to get rid of, you belong.” She makes some more invitations and concludes this section with, “... you have a place too, in the circle of those who cry for mercy.”⁶¹⁷ The preacher is not explicit about speaking on behalf of God, and yet the invitation sounds as though God is inviting me to join this circle that calls to God. I have a place to belong.

5) The issue of the tension between doing good out of obligation (law) and doing good out of wild graciousness (grace) is treated directly in this sermon. The preacher takes three different moments – at the beginning, the middle, and the end – to directly speak about the tension between what we ought to do or are commanded to do, and what comes out of sheer gratitude. Her honesty is refreshing. In the beginning of the sermon she places those who want to do good in the circle of the needy. She is explicit that we are invited to be there. In the middle of the sermon, the preacher comments on Jesus’ command to the lepers to “Go!” This is law, but law is “God’s gracious instance that we take steps that are *our part* in getting well.”⁶¹⁸ The lepers go and are healed on the way, as so often is the case for all of us. The lepers who do not return to give thanks are not ungrateful but rather are on their way to go back into the lives they once had –

616. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 14.

617. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 8.

618. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 10.

where there is social approval. The preacher is again direct at the end of the sermon as she tells the congregation that she is in an “awkward place.” She wants to speak about giving spontaneous beauty back to God, but she knows that when she utters such a thing it may sound like command, like law.⁶¹⁹

“An Impossible Christmas,” by Paul Scott Wilson⁶²⁰

1) This is a biblical sermon based on Luke 1:26-55. This is a “four page” sermon with page two, the trouble in the world, coming first. This is followed by a mix of pages one and three, trouble in the text and grace in the text. Page four, grace in the world, serves as the conclusion. Thus the biblical passage is treated in the middle of the sermon. The questions in page two set us up to hear the biblical story. We are asked on page two if we are expecting a possible or impossible Christmas. The possible Christmas includes familiar Christmas festivities and events. The problem with this Christmas is that it is all under our control and thus nothing is really happening to change the world. What is predictable about this Christmas is that no saviour is born, women keep being abused, and AIDS continues to ravage the world. Wilson turns to Mary and her song for a glimpse of the impossible Christmas, where seemingly impossible things may happen. Mary responds to the angel’s message that this must be impossible. What she learns though is that with God all things are possible. In faith and in trust she declares her willingness to have the Christmas where God is in control. On page four, where we explore the grace in the world, Wilson continues with reciting the biblical text to us, for it speaks good news directly. What God does for Mary and for the shepherds, God does for us here and now. Among other lines from the Christmas story, Wilson speaks this one to the congregation directly: “The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid.”⁶²¹ These words are for us! According to the biblical text, thankfully, Christmas is in God’s control and not ours. We are invited to do what Mary did, to respond to the

619. Childers, *Birthing the Sermon*, 13.

620. Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words* (Nowhere), 59–62.

621. Wilson, *Broken Words*, 61.

impossible by saying, “Here I am.”

2) God’s grace is at the centre of this sermon. Page two, which begins the sermon, has the listener realizing that the Christmas that we are in control of may be fun and predictable, but because we are in control of it, little will ever change in the world. It is when Wilson turns to the text and Mary’s response of disbelief that we begin to witness the reality that when it comes to God’s grace, here God’s gift of Jesus as a child, we are not in control – God is. God can make what seems to be impossible a possibility. Much of page four is direct promises made to the congregation from texts usually directed to characters in the Christmas story. Here we are not simply learning about God’s promises, but being promised the impossible.

3) There is a playful tension in this sermon. At first, we are entertained by the possible Christmas but soon learn that, ironically, even though there may be celebration of the Christ child, nothing will change when Christmas is in our hands. We then enter the oddity and impossibility of the angel’s address to Mary the high school student. She had been to sex education classes. She could not be the mother of a new king. How could this be possible? But she soon learned that this was God’s event and that what God promised would come true. There is still tension coming to page four because while it may be that God could do the impossible back then, God can’t do it now. But here Wilson speaks to the congregation with the voice of the angels, promising new life and impossible things *for us*. There is some tension right to the end where we still need to hear, “Impossible, some say. Yes it is impossible. But all things are possible with God.”⁶²²

4) This sermon contains direct proclamation. As noted above, on page four Wilson speaks a number of biblical lines directly to the congregation from the angels of heaven,

The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. For this Christmas Jesus Christ will be born unto you as your Lord and Savior. And you will call this child the son of God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you.⁶²³

622. Wilson, *Broken Words*, 62.

623. Wilson, *Broken Words*, 61.

5) This sermon places discipleship in the context of God's grace. Mention of many things that humans try to do for the poor, the battered, and the dying are listed on page two at the beginning of the sermon. Under our control, we have not been able to solve these issues: it would be impossible to do such a thing. But following this page, and moving through to Mary and the way God makes the impossible possible, places the listener in an empowered place to look again at some of these serious realities. Wilson offers no quick fix for these major problems in the world but has us leaning on God in faith and with our "Here I am" to a God who can make the impossible possible.

"Untitled Sermon" by Shauna K. Hannan⁶²⁴

1) This is a biblical sermon based on Matthew 21:23-32 with reference to Philippians 2. Hannan's sermon moves from the religious leader's questioning of Jesus' authority coupled with Jesus response, to two of the parables that Jesus tells in further response to the initial question of his authority. Hannan wants to show that Jesus' words to the religious leader, although they sound harsh, "aren't fighin' words, this is a love story." Jesus initial response and then telling if the parables are meant to soften the hearts of these hard-hearted religious leaders. Jesus is trying to tell them that they were once marginal and dispossessed, and that God was good to them. Jesus is trying to show them that God is madly in love with them! Hannan then reads a hymn from a 13th century Franciscan based on Philippians 2 which communicates passionate "Song of Solomon" love of God in Jesus and the human love that cannot help but reciprocate. She returns to the Matthew text and the religious leaders' correct assumption that "Jesus has lost his mind," in the way that he loves the blind, the lame, and others who are marginalized. This sermon closes with Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross and an invitation: "... God's story in Jesus is a love story for you. Welcome to the madness! AMEN"

624. Shauna K. Hannan, "Love Story," Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, MP3, http://www.ltss.edu/media_center/sermons/ (accessed November 16, 2011). Dr. Hannan communicated to me that the title "Love Story," was for the purposes of the website only. She prefers not to title her sermons. Thus I have called it "Untitled Sermon."

2) This sermon places God's grace at the centre. From the very first lines we hear that Jesus' seemingly harsh response to the question of authority asked by the religious leaders is not meant to offend them: "These aren't fight' in words, this is a love story." Jesus is trying to tell the "hard-hearted" listeners to hear and see that they have amnesia. They have forgotten that God "gets cozy with the disfranchised, the stigmatized, and the marginalized." They have forgotten that God was with them in their time of slavery and struggle and that God continues to love them. The parable serves to communicate to the leaders that they are far from the God who loves them so dearly, but could come close if they could only see. They cannot seem to see how God is so madly in love with them that he would become human. The poem serves to deepen this sense of God's love and the human love that cannot help but love in return. "I see that love has so bound you as to almost strip you of your greatness. How then could I find the strength to resist, to refuse to share in its madness." With this poem the preacher performs the love in the incarnation of Christ and also takes us to the cross. We go to the cross again in the closing part of the sermon, reminding us of Jesus' words of forgiveness which were not only for those who killed him but for all who have a hard heart – who have forgotten their histories and have not yet responded.

3) This sermon has a lively tension between God's love (grace) and human hard-heartedness (trouble). There is also tension between a well ordered faith and one that is mad and senseless with love. The first tension that Hannan introduces us to is the reality that Jesus' words are not simply meant as a harsh rebuke. He is trying to love these leaders with his words. At the same time his words to the elders and the parable are "law" in the sense that Jesus is trying to hold up a mirror so that these leaders see that they are blind and have amnesia. The next tension that we as listeners feel is the tension between proper and orderly faith and faith that has at the centre a God who is so mad with love that he would lose his "senses to the point that he becomes human." This mad love is continued in the poem where the creative language pulls us into God's love in a most unorthodox way: "You went about the world as if you were drunk, led by love as if you were a slave." The listener is unhinged by Jesus being characterized as "drunk with love"

and a “slave.” The poem also characterizes human response as “senseless” and at the same time sensuous: the poet is playing with lovers language for God’s love and the love that we offer to God. “For the same love that makes me lose my senses seems to have striped you of wisdom. The love that makes me weak is the love that made you renounce all power.” This lover’s language continues even when the preacher recalls Jesus’ words on the cross. “Golgotha, it was there that God emptied God’s self, melted with longing for the absent beloved.” The final word, that this is “a love story for you,” and “Welcome to the madness!” leave the listener loved by God and also just a bit uncomfortable with that love – for this love is not predictable but “mad” and “senseless.”

4) This sermon contains direct proclamation of God’s love. The poem has us speaking words of love to God directly through another’s words. Bayer might say that the poet’s words have us in loving response to the God who first spoke to us in love. The poem starts with a loving description of what God has done in coming humbly to be with humans and then ends with a lover running to God: “I cannot delay nor seek to. Love’s captive. I make no resistance.” Now that we have been speaking words of love to God, the preacher can turn this around and have God’s love speak to us. We see Jesus on the cross, and then the preacher says “... God’s story in Jesus is a love story for you. Welcome to the madness!” We are addressed by God’s love after hearing about it throughout the whole sermon. The love of God is not just for those in Matthew’s account, and not only for the poet, God’s personal address of love is for the “fellow religious leaders” who are listening in this seminary chapel, in this moment.

5) This sermon places discipleship in the context of God’s grace. Hannan is dealing with the same tension that Blaisdell treated, as noted above. How does the preacher communicate a responsive, reciprocal love of God and a spontaneous love of the neighbour without turning the response into a command? Hannan writes of discipleship in the language of love, even passionate “Song of Solomon” love. This is a love that is not hard-hearted but soft-hearted; so soft that it is senseless and mad. It is a love that remembers God’s love in the past, and sees the love of God

for the marginalized and even for the religious leaders in the present. It is a love that cannot resist. It is captive to its lover. Hannan effectively shows that discipleship is first of all about God's love, and then about the love that cannot help but reciprocate.

Comment on Sermons

As noted above, these sermons conform to varying degrees to the ideal characteristics of a sermon that places God's grace in the centre. Nonetheless each of these sermons has a place in the course schedule as listed below. For instance, when discovering the Lutheran sense of spontaneity and freedom in reciprocal love of God we will read Hannan's sermon, where she effectively uses passionate language to underscore this aspect of faith.

Class Schedule and Assignments

The classes for this course will proceed as follows:

Week one: Discussion of Lutheran - Mennonite differences in history, theology, soteriology, ethics and hermeneutics."

Introductions, discussion of syllabus and expectations. Lecture on recent Lutheran-Mennonite dialogues in North America and Europe and the issues that have come to the fore. Sermon to be read in class "Mother to Mother: Centered in a Circle of Need" by Barbara Shires Blaisdell. Note how she speaks openly about "law" or "command" and "gospel."

Weeks two and three: "Mennonite theological ethics through the eyes of John Howard Yoder and interlocutors"

Week two: Lecture and discussion on the historical setting and the content of *The Politics of Jesus*.

Week three: **Assignment #1:** Students will present a critical review (10 minutes) of one aspect of Yoder's theology. Sermon to be read in class: "The Talking God and the Speechless Prophet," by Allan Rudy-Froese. Where does Allan bring up ethics or discipleship in this sermon? Is it direct enough?

Weeks four and five: "Lutheran theological ethics through the eyes of Oswald Bayer and interlocutors"

Week four: Lecture and discussion on Oswald Bayer's *Living by Faith*. Lectures will cover material from other works by Bayer.

Week five: **Assignment #2:** Students will present an oral critical review (10 minutes) of one aspect of Oswald Bayer's work. Sermon to be heard in class via the wonders of the

internet by Dr. Shauna K. Hannan. Note how she invites us to discipleship without commanding it. How does she do this?

Weeks six and seven: “Anabaptist and Lutheran Preaching”

Week six: Lecture and discussion on *Anabaptist Preaching*.

Week seven: Lecture and discussion on *Kairos Preaching*. Sermon to be read in class: “Swept Upstream” by Eugene Lowry. How is he being biblical in this sermon? Where is discipleship emphasized?

Weeks eight and nine: “Setting words on fire”

Week eight: Discussion of *Setting Words on Fire* in the context of the New Homiletic with special attention to the difference between text and gospel, and teaching and proclamation. Sermon to be read in class: “The Impossible Christmas,” by Paul Scott Wilson. Where does Wilson teach and where does he proclaim?

Assignment #3 : At the beginning of week eight, students will hand in a 15 page paper on their understanding of God’s grace in connection with Christian discipleship using our required texts plus five other sources. I can help direct you to appropriate bibliography.

Sermon: Discussion of *Setting Words on Fire* with emphasis on the subgenres of trouble and grace. Sermon (fragments) to be read in class will be from *Setting Words on Fire*.

Weeks ten through thirteen: “Student sermons”

Sign up in these weeks for **Assignment #4**. Here we expect a 12 minute sermon on a text of your choosing with a brief (300 word) sermon rationale. How is your sermon 1) biblical, 2) centred on God’s grace, 3) playful and tensive (trouble and grace), 4) proclamatory, and 5) inviting us to Christian discipleship in the context of God’s grace?

Commentary on Schedule and Assignments

It is hoped that this class, with its lectures, readings, sermon discussions and assignments will be a good resource for moving grace to the centre of the preached sermon in a Mennonite context. The required theological texts are only meant to seduce the students to do more reading. Bayer’s work is especially short and students will be directed to several chapters in *Martin Luther’s Theology* and other articles depending on their interest. *Anabaptist Preaching* and *Kairos Preaching* are read following the theological works as a way to connect each tradition to one present homiletical interpretation of that tradition. These two works together with *Setting Words on Fire* give much room to review and discuss the best of the New Homiletic, or the post-

New Homiletic – because the New Homiletic is not so new anymore. Wilson’s work allows the student to theologically and practically enter into the law/gospel school of homiletics where God’s grace is the centre of the preached sermon. The first two assignments allow students to clearly articulate similarities and differences between Lutheran and Mennonite views. The third assignment has the student owning her own view on God’s grace and Christian discipleship – yet that view is still rooted in the traditions of the church.

But will it preach? The final assignment allows the student to demonstrate that theological study, together with the Spirit’s help, close biblical reading, and learning from fellow students in class can produce a sermon where God’s grace is placed at the centre. We are looking for a sermon that not only is about faith and discipleship, but does faith through the Spirit and gives the energy for discipleship. The five characteristics of a grace-centred sermon as noted above would serve as key points for class and teacher evaluations of the student sermon.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that moving grace to the centre of the sermon requires biblical, theological, and homiletical sources, wisdom, and integration. Specifically, the task of moving God’s grace to the centre of Mennonite theology and preaching, where a strong theology of discipleship is at the forefront, required focus on the issue of God’s grace and Christian ethics. The latter was characterized variously in this study as Christian discipleship, Christian behaviour, or simply Christian life. Challenged by “much to do but little power to do it,” and inspired by a recent wave of curiosity and passion for integrating God’s grace with discipleship in the Mennonite church, this project has attempted to note the sources and dynamics involved in moving grace to the centre of the sermon. Looking to the biblical text, theology, and homiletics and their interactions with each other is akin to the journey the preacher takes from ‘text to sermon.’

From a slice of Paul’s writings and accompanying scholarship I noted that Paul encourages his listeners on the issue of Christian behaviour and suffering by placing them “in

Christ,” a new territory or sphere where there is superabundant grace for freedom and for a new kind of life which includes obedience to the one who has saved them. Looking for grace in the work of John Howard Yoder showed that while God’s grace is evident, it is also not developed in connection with his strong and influential work on discipleship as a close following of the nonviolent Jesus. Looking for the dynamics of grace and ethics in the theology of Oswald Bayer revealed that God’s spoken and effective *promissio* lifts the uncurved human to one who is standing tall and can see God, creation, and the neighbour with clarity, wonder, and generosity. With regard to homiletics, the law/gospel school, in responding to the early years of the New Homiletic, and in re-discovering Lutheran and Reformed views of the gospel showed how, in hermeneutics, theology, and method, to move God’s grace to the centre of the sermon. Lastly, possibilities were noted and sample sermons were analyzed with a view to integrating law/gospel theology and homiletics into Mennonite theology and preaching. In the end, it has been shown that teaching about ethical issues, or allowing Jesus to serve as model for life in the sermon is important and even crucial. However, teaching serves in the sermon to support proclamation of God’s effective *promissio*. What the sermon is about is important; but what the sermon is doing, or more precisely, what Christ is doing through the Spirit in the sermon is what is crucial as the preacher studies, writes and embodies the sermon. In proclamation the listener can pause and let Christ do some good.

An enduring image which has been discovered in this study is that of the inwardly curved human who is addressed in speech. When God addresses, when Christ bids “Be Open!,” when the Spirit calls, and the human hears this address and responds, the human is uncurved by the power of grace. In the hearing of God’s effective promise the human has open eyes and a welcoming stance to view God, creation, and fellow humans. This human is outward facing and ready to serve. The uncurved human, with her church, faces outward so as to see the world, but also keeps coming back to the word, table, and water for sustenance.

It could be that this move from curved to uncurved, initiated and completed by God's effective address could be developed more fully as an image for preaching that places God's grace as the centre. At every stage of the preaching process, from reading the text to embodying the sermon, this image could be useful. The preacher comes to the text with a curved self to be fed again by an address from God. When the preacher reads the text, and she pauses to let Christ do some good, proclamation is set in motion for the sermon. The uncurved and open preacher not only teaches but proclaims this gospel as an uncurved human. Her words and her embodiment of those words are heard as teaching and as proclamation in such a way that Christ speaks to the congregation. In this effective proclamation from God, heard through the voice and friction of a fellow human being, the congregation is again uncurved and ready to see again, to worship again, and to serve again.

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