

Christian Education

Colleagues,

For starting the new year we have Bob Conrad's review of Norma Cook Everist's recent book—both of the principals dear friends from ancient days—Norma a Valparaiso University student when I first started teaching there ages ago, and Bob, seminary classmate in the 1950s and then faculty colleague at Seminex two decades later.

Since I've dabbled in the field myself for half a century, I've pasted a couple of related items at the end after Bob's review. But his review is this week's main attraction. That comes first.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Christian Education as Evangelism.

Edited by Norma Cook Everist.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 163 Pages.

This is a book well worth reading. However, I have some reservations about the title. The book is written by Christian Education professors at Lutheran seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada [ELCIC]. All of them are at pains to make the case that Christian Education is evangelism. Evangelism is only one of the functions of the church.

There are four others besides education (paideia) and witness (marturia): leiturgia (worship); diakonia (service); koinonia (fellowship); and oikonomia (stewardship).

Why all the attention to witness to the exclusion of the others? Is it a perceived notion that witness is the most important function for a stalemated church? I find it interesting that Christian Education professors would put all their eggs in one basket to the detriment of the other functions of the church, including Christian Education.

Be that as it may, there are interesting points made in the separate chapters of the book. The most interesting chapters are those which report experiences of Christian Education as evangelism. Mary Hughes reports the experiences of three Ohio congregations. Eddie Kwok reports on education in a multicultural situation with the Chinese in Canada. Nelson Strobel reports on his experience in a parochial elementary school in New York and makes the case for church schools also at the secondary and higher education levels.

The remaining chapters are split between an emphasis on evangelism and education. Four focus on education and five on evangelism. Diane Hymans' opening chapter focuses on education. Education, she says, helps people to understand what something means. Understanding is more than simply knowing. It moves from facts to what the facts mean. She says that we need to maintain the language of education to name and describe what is an essential ministry of the church. Education focuses on understanding the gospel and how it shapes who we are and how we live our lives.

Mary Hess, in her chapter, uses the work of Keagan and Lacey to describe language that transforms. The first language is From Complaint to Commitment. The second personal language is From Blame to Personal Responsibility. The third language is From New Year's Resolutions to Competing Commitments. And the fourth is From Assumptions that Hold Us to Assumptions We Hold. The three social languages are: From Prizes and Praising to Ongoing

Regard; From Rules and Policies to Public Agreement; from Constructive to Deconstructive Criticism. As helpful as these languages are, Hess barely indicates how they are related to Christian Education.

Norma Everist offers a four stage approach to the education of people.

- First: Who are the people among whom we are called to teach? What daily language do they speak?
- Second: How are people interpreting what they hear?
- Third: Beyond the church doors where do people go to carry out their mission and ministry?
- Fourth: How are people hearing the gospel that members live and speak? The emphasis on the language of daily living is very helpful.

The final chapter by Susan McArver is the story of the development of the ELCA 2007 Social Statement on Education which states that Lutherans have a rich heritage upon which to draw. The statement posits a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the concept of education connected with both faith and world; it states that Lutherans support public education; the statement addresses the church and its institutions rather than the church's response to society; and the statement indicates that education often leads to evangelism.

The following five chapters are essentially about evangelism. Margaret Krych uses Paul Tillich as one of her primary sources. Tillich says that there are three primary functions of the church: missions, education and evangelism. Oddly enough, he speaks of evangelism as that which is directed to disaffected church members.

The weight of Tillich's argument is placed on evangelism rather than education. Carol Jacobsen's emphasis is on living outside

oneself for God and the neighbor. That is the impetus for evangelism. Donald Just's emphasis is on making evangelism not just another program of the church. Phyllis Kersten's contribution is on women hearing in their own language and men hearing in theirs – a notable admonition. Kristine Lund targets young adults and how to reach them in cyberspace. As the reader can see, the emphasis in these five chapters is on evangelism. Education is secondary.

Addendum to book review.

I would entitle the book, "Christian Education and Evangelism" and be rid of the implication that Christian Education and evangelism are the same. Evangelism is proclamation of the gospel to those who have not heard it. Christian Education is for understanding the meaning of what is believed. However, the effect of the Gospel is determined by the situation of the learner. The Gospel is good news to the person convicted of sin. It is bad news to the person trapped in sin and unwilling to acknowledge it.

The phrase, "Jesus died so that your sins can be forgiven" can be law or Gospel depending on the situation of the learner. When the Gospel is proclaimed it can be good news or bad news regardless of the setting in which it is spoken. In that regard there is similarity between education and evangelism. However, there is still the distinction between coming to believe (evangelism) and understanding the meaning of what is believed (education).

Robert Conrad, Educational Ministry Professor Emeritus
The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

A lengthy postscript: Some thoughts on theology and pedagogy.

Fifty years ago at Valparaiso University Bob Bertram, just-appointed head of the theology department, put Bob Schultz and

me to work with a guinea-pig group of college freshmen to concoct the first-ever class of "Crossings theology." It was intended to be Course number 1 in the new theology curriculum at Valparaiso grounded in the lectionary readings of the Church Year—"New Testament Readings: Gospels" and then "New Testament Readings: Epistles." Bertram had mesmerized President O.P.Kretzmann into accepting it as the required theology sequence for all degree students. Schultz and I, young Turks just back from Germany (he already a Dr.theol, me still an "all-butter") confected a syllabus, articulated a pedagogy and then team-taught the trial-run experiment—scissors-and-pasting as we went. In the coming fall semester an "improved" version—having been"field-tested"—was inflicted on 1000 freshmen entering the university. Also, so said some departmental colleagues, was it "inflicted" on them to teach it! For teaching NTR was also not the same as teaching the old standard church-college religion sequence—one course in Bible, one in doctrine, one in church history and one in ethics. NTR sought to weave those four threads together—in every course—starting with the church lectionary readings for the previous Sunday. And the pedagogical method was different—or so we thought.

Here was our initial statement. I think it's basically Bob Schultz's prose.

INTRODUCTION TO NTR

Theology can be studied in a number of ways. One method with which many of you are familiar is through the simple learning of true statements about God and our relationship to him. This method achieves its goal when the student understands these statements and is able to apply them to new problems of thought and of understanding which present themselves. This method of study presupposes that our relationship to God is determined by what we know about him and identifies our present problem as not

knowing enough.

A second method of study has been developed by those who disagree with these basic presuppositions. In this method, the aim of theological study is not basically changed but something is added to it. In addition to the intellectual study the student is also expected to undergo a personal experience. These two, the acquisition of knowledge and the personal experience, are not necessarily related to one another. This is the weakness of this method. Its strength is that it recognizes that our relationship to God is not only an intellectual one but one which involves our total existence.

In our NTR courses we propose to follow a third method. Rather than simply communicating the results of our study we shall be more interested in helping you to carry on your own studies. We realize that your results will often not be as deep or even as true as those which your instructor has achieved. This is a disadvantage. We feel that it is outweighed by other considerations. Theological knowledge is, we think, not really knowledge until you have personally come to terms with it. First of all, then, we want you to learn to hear what the New Testament is saying to you in your own situation. Whatever that is, it will call for a change not only in your thinking about yourself but in your very relationship to God. For the primary purpose of the New Testament is not to tell us how to think about ourselves or even about God but rather to tell us how God thinks about us. Sometimes you will find the whole structure of your life transformed by hearing what God has to say about you (faith). At other times you will find yourself in violent opposition to God's word about your life and the nature of your existence (unbelief). All of us find both reactions within ourselves. We as a staff are personally concerned that you increasingly grow in the faith relationship. We shall, however, neither consider ourselves nor you academic failures if you

reject God's word to you.

President Kretzmann has stated this purpose very well in an article on the "Idea of the Christian University" in the CRESSET (September 1959, p.8):

"...the truly Christian university can proudly engage in what Kierkegaard called 'passionate thinking.' It becomes less cold, less abstract, less 'objective.' Kierkegaard notes: 'All Christian knowledge, however strict its form, ought to be anxiously concerned ... the high aloofness of indifferent learning is, from the Christian point of view, far from being seriousness; it is, from the Christian point of view, jest and vanity.' This is the major reason why the truly Christian university can be the home of the liberal arts at their highest and best. It pursues their teaching and learning under a dynamic of love and faith which can change them radically from a mere quality of the mind to an imperative for action in the world. Since they are known and communicated in love they represent high learning transmuted by the alchemy of personal involvement. Under this view the university becomes as no one else the high follower of the Man Whose love for man flowered into magnificent expression amid the cold traditionalism of the synagogue."

Our concern in the following weeks then is primarily a religious concern. We shall try to help you confront God's word in its depth. We shall, for that reason, not always be able to confront you with the full breadth of its intellectual content. We shall not even be able to cover the full range of the material suggested by the syllabus in our classroom discussions. The syllabus is designed to help you come to grips with the material personally. We shall give you stimulation and help in the classroom. For this reason, we feel that your personal

participation in the discussions is essential to your work in this course. Only through that will we be able to help you and you be able to help one another at the point where it is needed.

Because we are aiming at this type of knowledge in which the understanding of God's truth takes place through a personal experience, your own progress will not follow a definite pattern. Do not despair if any particular week's work strikes you as unsuccessful. Sometimes it is only the preparation for next week's insight.

Now perhaps some of you are thinking: "What kind of examinations can they possibly give to test whether this purpose has been achieved? Am I going to have to fabricate personal confessions of faith in order to get a grade?" By no means. We shall not try to test for personal experience nor to grade on the basis of it. On the other hand, neither shall we test for your ability to simply repeat the "truths" which we have given our official stamp of approval. What we shall test for is your ability to confront a paragraph of the Bible and to analyze and communicate its message to a person in a particular situation. We shall give you the section of Scripture. We shall also give you a life-situation. You will on the basis of the assigned text formulate God's word to a person in that situation (A completely "true" answer may receive an F because it misses the point.) Sometimes we shall also give you a quick examination to determine whether you have worked through the material for any particular day. But that will only be a test of preparation and not of our common success in achieving the goals of this course.

In order to test your preparation we shall also require specific use of the assigned readings in your formulation of the essays. This must be more than a mere reference. You must show how the point of this particular reading assignment contributes to our total understanding of our relationship to God. The essays are

for your benefit, not ours. We shall not grade all your essays every week. Rather we shall use them as an occasional check on the level of your preparation. It is possible for us to get an accurate picture of several weeks' work from one week's essay because the work of each semester is cumulative in nature. Each week presupposes all the weeks (+ NTR courses) which preceded it. The reading assignments should be prepared for the first class meeting each week. The essays should be prepared for the second class meeting. The Honor Code applies to all written work. Use any help for your thinking you can, but do your OWN writing.

A postscript to that postscript:

Speaking of Valparaiso University, just a few days ago a new president was elected. I asked a VU staffer to give me the inside story. Here's what he told me. His words are cheering. As a VU alum (B.A. (1950) and a long-term staffer (1957-71) I couldn't be more pleased. Almost wish I could turn the clock back and start those 14 years all over again. Almost.

"I am delighted with the board's choice of Mark Heckler as new president for Valparaiso University. The three finalists were very different from one another. The only LCMSer, and only cleric to boot, was Patrick Ferry, current president of Concordia College [LCMS], Mequon, Wisconsin. His appearance among the finalists had some of us spooked, as he's a Ft. Wayne Seminary grad and has spent pretty much his whole career at Mequon, where all kinds of theological craziness goes on. He seemed like a pleasant enough person, and he professed to be affirmative toward things like ELCA/LCMS cooperation at VU and even toward women's ministries. He grew up without a church or a religious background, but went to St John's College [LCMS], Winfield, Kansas, to play basketball and fell in love with Prof. X's daughter and, as so often happens with a glandular attack,

got religion at the same time.

Wayne Powell, currently president of ELCA college Lenoir Rhyne, is an academic through and through-mathematician son and grandson of academics (all in the sciences). His brother Mark teaches New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. He was a provost at Texas A & M before going to Lenoir Rhyne. An ELCA lay person, he was the only life-long Lutheran in the group.

Mark Heckler is the first member of his eastern Pennsylvania, blue-collar family to go to college. He grew up in the Church of the Brethren and went to one of that denomination's colleges, then taught at another such school before going to University of Colorado-Denver to be an administrator. His wife, Veronica, grew up in the (Russian) Orthodox Church. They picked a Lutheran church as their "compromise" 20 or so years ago, and they're active ELCA lay people. Veronica, in fact, served for a few years as the Youth Director at their church in Littleton, CO—the church Don Marxhausen served at the time of the Columbine School massacre.

The Columbine story plays a large part in the Hecklers' lives, as their son Zack was a close friend of Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine perpetrators, up until a short time before the killings. It was Mark and Veronica Heckler who urged Don Marxhausen to minister to the Klebold parents and to have a funeral for Dylan—which Don did, with only the Klebolds and Hecklers in attendance.

I got to drive Mark back to O'Hare (Chicago) Airport after his interview and we talked a long time about all that. Mark said that nothing in his life tested him and the rest of his family like that experience. His faith, theology, sanity, grip on reality, trust in other human beings—everything seemed to have

come unglued for a while. But having come through that, his tested faith and harshly-examined theology are stronger and deeper than ever, he says.

I came away from this conversation convinced that Mark is a man of deep and genuine faith who will work hard to keep church-relatedness, theology, and the cultivation of faith along with learning central elements of Valpo's identity and mission.

On top of all this, Mark is a truly charismatic and winsome person. A man with stage presence, he's also quite articulate, something it will take us time to get used to. You can actually hear all nine syllables when he says, 'Valparaiso University.'"

Abraham's Paradoxical Experience of God

Fear and Trusting the God Who Promises to Save Us from God's Self

1. **Who do you say "I am"?** That question which the conference places before us evokes one of the most challenging tasks that Christians face today: namely, how to make their God known to their neighbors in such a way that 1) the truth about God not only makes some semblance of "sense" with regard to their everyday experience, but 2) that that truth (expressible only through a proper distinction and coordination of law and gospel) is also ultimately received as genuinely "good news" in the ears of the hearer.

2. Something of that challenge confronted me when I was a newly ordained pastor in Chicago back in 1985. Pilgrim Lutheran on the North Side had a young adults group. One night when we met only one person showed up, call her Marcia. She was a young adult who came every Sunday to Church, who was kind and soft spoken, yet not afraid to express her skepticism about many things. Marcia wasn't the kind to take anything at face value. That night, after a long conversation about Jesus, about who we confess him to be, about what he does for us, about how we meet him still today, in the here and now, in Word and Sacrament and in the mutual conversation of brothers and sisters in Christ, Marcia came to this conclusion: "You know, it all sounds very nice, but how do know it's true. There are so many other explanations." After a moment of silence I asked, "What would it take for you to believe it is true?" She now drifted into a moment of silence, and then, with all honesty said, "I don't know, but I'd like to."

3. Marcia is right. There are so many other answers to the question before us. But note, the issue before us is not that the Marcia's of the world have never heard of God. On the contrary, the world in which we live boasts a myriad of conclusions about who God is. The problem we face as Christians is not unlike that which supporters of a candidate for president face. Name recognition is readily there, but do you really know the *person* who stands behind the name? Especially, when you have so many special interest groups eager to put their spin on who the candidate really is.

4. Think for a moment about all the conclusions about God that exist in the public square. Classical philosophy has its idea about who God is: He is the one who stands for and grounds all that we behold as good. Atheists have an idea about who God is: He is the figment of a fertile, but infantile imagination that hinders human potentiality. Agnostics have an idea about who God

is: He is that one who refuses to be known and, therefore, throws us back on ourselves. The religions of the world have an idea about God: He is the one who grounds the moral law, the “ought” that pervades human interaction. New Age Spirituality has an idea about who God is: He is the one who is identical with our innermost being and our highest aspirations. Eastern Spirituality has an idea about who God is: He/it is the complex mental or spiritual structure of the universe to which we are to conform. Civil religion has an idea about who God is: He is the ground and justification for all that a nation is and does. What are the Marcias of the world to do?

5. Of course, I can only here, in this short time, hint at a way of approaching this question. And the way I want to do that is by beginning to consider the form of the conference question itself: “Who do you say ‘I am’?” As I see it, the conference planners set the “I am” in quotes for at least two reasons, for the sake of a double entendre, so to speak.

God and Faith Go Together

6. First, the question is framed in the grammar of direct address. It presupposes that God asks this question and that God is right here in our midst asking it of us. To be sure, the question does come through the form of a conference, but don’t be fooled God is now asking this question to you and to me.

The conference is mere one of many masks behind which or venues through which this question gets asked every day. Who do you say “I am?” The question is not one of idle speculation or of an overactive curiosity. Note, also, that the question does not ask: “Do you think God exists?” Though it certain may imply, “why do you act as though I don’t exist?” (Those of us with spouses know something of that kind of question.) Rather, it’s a question about honoring God as God, because the word “god,” is

not in the first instance a metaphysical concept. It is a relational one. Who do you say “I am”? asks “Do you say I’m *your* God—emphasis on “your”—or is there another who stands in that place?

7. The question, in other words, presupposes exactly what Luther talks about in his Large Catechism explanation of the first commandment. I quote it at length.

“You shall have no other gods.”

That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

Answer: A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith in the heart that make both God and idol. If your faith and trust is right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. *Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.*

8. Therefore, the question “Who do you say “I am” is not about the *existence* of the one true God, but whether we believe him to be *our* God for or whether we have we placed something else in that position. The issue is illustrated in that story (Genesis 12:10-20) where Abraham (still known as Abram) sojourned with God and Sarah his wife (still know as Sarai) into the land of Egypt because of a famine. Sarah was beautiful and Pharaoh was powerful. When asked who this beauty was Abraham said his sister, for fear that Pharaoh might kill him and have Sarah as his own wife. Note, what Abraham denied was not Sarah’s literal

existence but her relationship to him as wife. What's more, in his fear of Pharaoh, what Abraham denied was not God's literal existence, but God's relation to him as God, as the One who would see him through. Abraham feared Pharaoh more than he trusted God, indeed, even more than he feared God, thus making Pharaoh, in effect, a god in his heart. Even more, Abraham's lack of faith (and true fear) in this instance led to disaster for Egypt. God, very displeased with all this, sent a great plague on the house of Pharaoh, presumably to get his attention. When Pharaoh found out what Abraham had done, he was infuriated with Abraham and in mortal fear (though not faith) in Abraham's God. Abraham had endangered everyone before God by his lack of faith—he endangered Sarah, he endangered Pharaoh, he endangered himself. "Who do you say 'I am'?" is a question not about the existence of God, but whether we regard him as *our* God—both with regard to our fearing him, but more important with our trusting him.

"I am who I am"

9. Second, the conference question ("Who do you say 'I am'?") with "I am" in quotes, also has obvious allusions to Exodus 3:14, where God identifies himself in a seemingly enigmatic way as "I am who I am," the phrase that gives rise to one of Israel's most common ways of "naming" her God. To understand it the context of its origin is very important: God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush in order to commission Moses to go to Pharaoh and say to him, "Let my people go." What is most striking is the way God initially identifies himself to Moses. "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). Note, God did not say he was *Moses'* God, for that relationship evidently has not as yet been established. That fact is underscored in the text by Moses' initial reaction to the theophany: "He hid his face, for he was

afraid to look at God" (Ex. 3:6). Nor did this God of the burning bush identify himself as the creator of the world or the sovereign over the nations—although all that is certainly true.

10. Rather, this God of the burning bush identifies himself to Moses as being a God who has "observed the misery of *his* people," who has "known *their* sufferings," who has "come down to deliver them from the Egyptians," and who will bring them into "a land flowing with milk and honey." Where Moses comes in is that this God of the burning bush say, and I "will send you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people out Egypt (Ex 3:7-10). It is important to note that God does not at this point give a resume to Moses of his mighty deeds, of his work as God almighty creator of heaven and earth, of the one who makes and breaks nations, who gives and takes away as he sees fit, the God of justice and right. Truth is, that would expose another whole side of this God that would distract or hid the reason he is carrying out this act of deliverance. It is for the sake of his promise to Abraham not for the sake of his divine majesty.

Therefore, at the moment God seems to be intent on keeping that aspect of his relation with the world hidden—although perhaps Moses fear already sensed something of that just under the surface. Rather, in this encounter, God exposes to Moses what is on his heart, his compassion for what to the world seems like an insignificant band of "immigrants," which is one likely meaning of the word Hebrew.

11. Of course, Moses is taken aback by all this. After all, he is himself a fugitive from Egyptian justice for the murder of one of Pharaoh's taskmasters (Ex. 2:11-15). So his retort is understandable on numerous levels: "Who am I," he says, "that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Egyptians out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:11). But here God's answer is even more striking. God does not list what great qualifications he sees in Moses for doing this. God hasn't picked Moses because he is the most qualified.

Rather, God picked Moses to be the recipient of a promise. Why Moses? Because “I will be with you,” says God, “and this will be a sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). The sign in other words is that I will make a believer out of you, Moses—not a believer in my divine majesty, for in truth the divine majesty alone cannot create faith, only fear. No. God is going to make Moses a believer in his promise, that I will be with you in this venture to see you through, and, of course, the sign of true faith in God is the true worship of God.

12. Of course, personally, Moses is not yet to the point this faith, though he has no doubt that the God of the burning bush exists. And so he raises another objection: “If I come to the Israelites, and say to them, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you’, and they ask me, ‘What is his name’, what shall I say to them” (Ex. 3:13). What is most curious here is why Moses would have to ask such a question? To be sure, his credibility among the Hebrews is nil. Remember how, after killing the Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave, he tried to stop a fight between two Hebrews. Remember, their retort: “Who made you ruler and judge over us,” you who “killed the Egyptian” (Ex. 2:14). Moses had no better standing with the Israelites than he did with the Egyptians. Still, living in Egypt, in close proximity to the Hebrews, certainly Moses would have known by what “name” the Hebrews called their God, if indeed there God had a name.

13. Nevertheless, the response that God gives to Moses has baffled biblical scholars to this day. “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14), God says, which is the translation of Yahweh. Question is: Is that a name? Or is it a rebuff to the very demand to have a name? Given the fact that the idea of “naming” in the second Genesis creation account implies power over (Genesis 2:19-20)—and one can never have power over God; given the fact

that God refused to give out a name to Jacob when Jacob wrestled with God at Peniel—on the contrary, God renamed Jacob “Israel” as a complement to the blessing there given (Gen. 32:22-32); and finally, given the fact that the term “Yahweh” will not be uttered on the lips of the descendants of Abraham hereafter—call that an appeal to the principle of *lex orandi, lex credenda* (the rule of worship is the rule of belief); I take God’s response “I am who I am,” to be a kind of gentile rebuff to Moses—a rebuff that from here on out will also become part of the legacy of God’s identity in the memory of the people of Israel: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am’ (literally “Yahweh,” which is usually translated as “The Lord”), the God of your ancestor, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has sent me to you.” 1

14. Still, we must ask the significance of this name-which-is-no-name? With all due respect to Paul Tillich, this is not a metaphysical statement about God as the “ground of being,” no matter how true that notion may be. The statement has its meaning only as it is understood in terms of interpersonal relations and not as metaphysical speculation. Indeed, God is saying in simple, straightforward terms “I am who I am,” I won’t be limited by names or your own inability to figure me out and place me in a box. I am free to be what I want to be; to do what I want to do; and to be known as I want to be known. In a sense, God rejects what we might call the “Feurerbach fallacy,” the assumption that God is nothing more than HUMANITY writ large, our way imposing our desires on the designs of the world. The rebuff, “I am who I am” is nothing more than what Luther meant when he said “let God be God.” It designates God in God’s majesty, power, and yes, his wrath. Here, with the story of Moses, we now have attached to the “name” for God a rebuff—Yahweh, “I am.” But note, this is not *simply* a rebuff. Rather, it is a rebuff that is intended to throw us back to God’s preferred way of being identified, that is, as the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is who he is and that includes the God of power and might, the God weal and woe. But more importantly, he wants to be known by his relationship to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is what God wants to take precedence.

God Wants to Be Known By God's Promises

15. To understand why that is the case, we do well to take a brief stroll backwards in time to the Abraham story. What we will discover in that story is that God primarily wants to be known by his promises, not by his powers. Unfortunately, we will also discover a humanity that is intent on the opposite: intent of wanting to relate to God by his powers and not by his promises—and not for the pious reason of fearing God, which is the beginning of wisdom, but for the haughty reason of seizing those powers for the sake of humanity's own self-aggrandizement. Of course, as we will further see, nothing is more illusory. It is the illusion of Adam and Eve in the Fall Story who presume that they could seize onto the divine fruit, the power of knowing of good and evil, thus become like God. It is the illusion of that industrious people in Tower Babel Story, who presumed that, by applying their own know-how, they could take heaven captive and set themselves up as masters of the world. These stories illustrate the reality of sin as the “will to power” (to use Friedrich Nietzsche's term) that deeply infects the human race. So pervasive is this infect that all human religion is in one way or another is an expression of it—religion being human aspirations directed to the divine powers and not to the divine promise. But as these stories also illustrate, any human attempt to seize upon the divine powers will only result in condemnation. For Adam and Eve that is symbolized in their expulse from the Garden and for the city of Babel in its confusion of language. The message of the Abraham

story is clear: only by seizing onto the divine promise by faith will humanity will condemnation be averted and salvation attained.

16. As Biblical Scholars know, the story of Abraham marks the beginning of biblical history. But even more, the story of Abraham marks the historical in-breaking (the revelation, if you will) of God's promise for the world. Of course, to make such a claim of about the historicity of Abraham is more of a statement of "faith" than of "fact," because "proving" it eludes the competency of modern historical investigation.² Outside the biblical record, we have no data that Abraham ever existed. The stories of Abraham have their roots in oral tradition, and his descendents will not begin to write down these stories for six or seven hundred years after his death. Even then, the accounts will be written down by different sectors of Jewish culture independently and from quite different points of view. Modern Biblical Scholarship knows these independent accounts as the Yawist, the Elohist and the Priestly traditions. It is only as the Hebrews cease their nomadic life style, and aspire to national and cultural greatness like the other nations around them³, do we begin to have this oral tradition written down. Be that as it may, what remains consistent throughout the Written Redaction of this oral tradition is the centrality of the promise in the Abraham account. Even though the bulk of the Hebrew Scriptures (at least by the measure of sure volume of writing) tends to focus on God's majesty and power (as displayed in the giving of the Law in the Sinai tradition or God's judgment upon a wayward Israel or a haughty Assyria, as displayed in the Prophetic Writings) nevertheless, the promise does echo through, for those who know what to listen for. Indeed, demonstrating that is a central focus of the exegesis of Jesus, Paul and New Testament writers generally. Even at that, the proof of a promise is ultimately in its fulfillment, not its

origins, and it is its fulfillment in time, in history, in Event of Jesus Christ, that becomes central thing for us with regard to the promise given to Abraham.

17. Who is Abraham? In truth, from a human perspective, he's really a no-body. His descendants describe him simply as a "wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26:5). He becomes significant when, out of the blue, God calls to him and sends him off to be a wanderer-bearing-a-promise, that is a *hebrew*, a word that I take means simply "a wander." Abraham seems to have no other special knowledge or experience of God than that he over and over breaks into his life making promises. Indeed, Abraham receives many promises from God: God is, first and foremost, for Abraham a promising God. To be sure, many of those promises will be of a temporal nature, historically conditioned, and fulfilled during his life time. Many of them, when received, are enigmatic until history brings further clarification and ultimate fulfillment. But the *first promise*, the initial promise that God gives him, which is the oft repeated promise, and which will also receive clarification as history progresses, is the defining promise. It is a universal promise that includes not only Abraham but the whole world—or more accurately, the world in relation with Abraham. Hear how the first promise reads:

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

18. As enigmatic as this promise may seem, the Christian tradition sees it as the beginning of a long line of clarifications and fulfillments that are the heart of God's

desire to bless “all the families of the earth.” Indeed, it is the conclusion of Paul that all the promises of God find their ultimate fulfillment, their ‘Yes!’, as he calls it, in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Although the *details* of the historical fulfillment of the promise remain hidden from Abraham and his posterity, even as some aspects of it still remain hidden to us because of the eschatological *provisio*, until Christ comes again, nevertheless, the outline of its significance does not.

19. As the text makes clear, the outline of the promise hinges on the distinction between “blessing” and “curse,” or what in other texts and contexts is described variously as the distinction between promise and judgment, law and gospel, the righteous of faith and the righteousness of the law, to name a few. The promise is that God will bless Abraham and that through him that blessing will impact the whole world, all the families of the earth. But what exactly is the content or purpose of the blessing. Answer: it is to overrule the curse that is already upon all humanity. I suppose we might ask—what curse? At this point, even that fact seems to be hidden from view. It’s like going to the doctor who says, here is the medicine you need. And you say, Medicine? I don’t feel sick. Even Abraham’s descendants will have to wait 430 years, if Paul’s dating is right (Gal. 3:17), until the full revelation of that curse will be revealed to them at Sinai. To know the cure before you sense the problem is intended as good news. Question is will it be received as such; will it be believed.

20. But a further question is naturally evoked. Exactly *whose* curse is it that the blessing is overruling? Answer: that of the promising God himself. In the promise made to Abraham God promises to save humanity from God’s self, beginning with Abraham and moving out to all the families of the earth. For humanity stands under the curse of God already. And although humanity may be little aware of that fact or little interested

in knowing about that fact, nevertheless, the promise presupposes it and begs the discussion of it. So, when the promising God says that those who bless Abraham will be blessed and those who curse Abraham will be curse, God does not mean that the curse is established for the first time by virtue of how people relate to the blessing that Abraham bears for the world. Rather, it means that without receiving the blessing of God first promised to Abraham, the medicine, the curse of God, the sickness, remains—indeed, it remains unto death.

21. Of course, as we already said, the promise does raise all kinds of questions about the nature of the curse, how it came into being, and how it is exhibited in the world. In general, that discussion comes under the category of “law” not “gospel,” though the gospel presupposes it, and in hindsight even brings some clarity to it. Moreover, the question concerning the curse pertains precisely to what Luther calls the “hidden God,” the God of power, majesty and justice, as opposed to the revealed God, the promising God who comes in compassion. What is hidden in the midst of God’s power, majesty and justice is God’s curse upon all humanity, not just history’s losers, but yes, even histories winners. That the God of power and the God of promise are numerically one and the same God is evidenced, it seems to me, in the story of Abraham’s encounter with that enigmatic figure of Melchizedek, king of Salem (Gen. 14:17-24). Melchizedek is described as “the priest of *El Elyon*, the most high God, maker of heaven and earth.” This is the description of God in his power and majesty, and it is the image of God that the sophisticated, powerful cultures of the world prize. They prize it not because they have a appropriate fear of this God, the beginning of wisdom, but because they claim the prerogatives of this God as their own. They claim the God of power and might as their God because they presume that’s why they possess power and might in the world. As Melchizedek comes out to greet

Abraham, he announces that his God, *El Elyon*, the Most High God, the creator God who rules over the affairs of nations, has “blessed” Abraham. Indeed, this God is the one who gave Abraham the victory over a number of Kings who waged a pre-emptive war against the King of Sodom and the other kings on the plain (Genesis 14:20). Abraham, remember, fights on their side for the sake of his nephew Lot who has made his home among the Sodomites and who was captured.

22. At this point, it is important to note that Abraham does recognize and honor, *El Elyon*, God in his power and majesty, God who is maker of heaven and earth. Indeed, Abraham honors him in a way that foreshadows the Sinai law, he does so precisely by giving to this God a tithe of all that Abraham gained in the battle. This God is a God of reciprocity and of retributive justice. By so doing this Abraham recognizes that Melchizedek represents the “hidden God,” whose power and majesty are adored, even coveted, by many, but whose wrath and strategies often remain hidden from human understanding. As priest, Melchizedek represents that character of deity that Moses, in his fear, sensed in his encounter with the burning bush, and that Moses would later behold, unambiguously, in the giving of the law to Israel on Mount Sinai amidst a specter of lightning, wind and thunder, signs of his wrath upon the calf-worshiping, flesh-pots-of-Egypt loving Israelites he just delivered. Still, what is most amazing in this encounter is that Abraham tells the king of Sodom that he will not keep any of the spoils of the war he just fought, lest the impression be given that it is God in his majesty and power that he adores and not the God of the Promise. Abraham seems to know that there are two bases upon which people can relate to God. Note: I say two bases for relating to the one God, not two gods. One can either relate to God by means of God’s power and majesty (a.k.a., the law) or by means of the promise (a.k.a. the gospel). Abraham’s unique calling is to see

to it that the later takes root. In that respect, Abraham and his posterity do not represent an ethnic group, a creation of *El Elyon*, the maker of heaven and earth. They are a creation of the promise and thus foreshadow the church as those called out from among the nations to relate to God on the basis of the promise.

23. On the heels of the Melchizedek encounter comes the classic text on the nature of the relationship between the God of promise and Abraham (Genesis 15:1-6). It is the one that Paul uses in Romans 4 to historically locate his hermeneutical key for reading the Abrahamic tradition: of Justification by faith. That hermeneutical key lead to assert that it is by faith in the promise (fulfilled in Christ) and not the works of the law (which exposes the reality of sin and the need of the promise) that define a salutary relation with God.

24. The story begins with Abraham having a vision in which he encounters "The Lord God." Evidently, Abraham was distraught about that fact that he was getting very old and that he and Sarah were still childless. The question emerges: God, will you make good on your promises? Can you make good on your promises? Here we see that there is a profound eschatological dimension to living by faith in the promise. It is only from the perspective of the end, promise fulfilled or failed, that a faith is shown to be good faith or bad faith. Note: the issue is not whether God exists. Rather, the issue is whether God will deliver on the promise. The issue rests on the level of the existential and the interpersonal.

25. The text makes clear that Abraham is living in fear at this point. He is wondering whether or not his faith has been misplaced. Moreover, God is quite aware of Abraham's existential angst, and quite sympathetic to Abrahams doubt. God is not unaware of the fact that the way of the promise is not without its epistemological challenges. Still, God insists on relating

to Abraham not by way of his power, but by way of his promise. And so, the first words God speaks to Abraham are words of promise. "Don't be Afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great" (vs. 1). Then God lets Abraham vent. And after the venting is over God again reiterates the promise, showing him the stars, and promising, so shall the number of your descendents be. This is a crucial moment, a crisis moment, a turning point, in God's and Abraham's relation. "For Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness (vs. 6). Crisis averted by the promise reiterated, and by faith receiving it.

26. God wants to be known by his promises and Abraham and his descendents become defined (as righteous) by their faith in the promise. In his treatise, "On the Freedom of a Christian," Luther says that faith has three powers. First, faith alone receives what is promised—eschatologically, of course, as something still waiting fulfillment, but, nevertheless, faith alone receives it. Second, faith alone honors the promiser in the highest possible way, because faith alone unambiguously acclaims the promiser as trustworthy. Third, faith alone unites the promiser and believer in an ongoing relationship that is likened to marriage. For what is the promiser's is the believer's and what is the believer's is the promiser's. This is the kind of life, the life of faith, that the God of the promise invited Abraham and his posterity into. As that promise to Abraham has been further clarified in history, particularly, in the Christ Event, what is amazing is the fact that the central outline of the promise hasn't changed. The promise to Abraham fulfilled in Christ is the promise to overrule the curse with blessing, condemnation with forgiveness, death with resurrection, a temporal journey with eternal rest.

Back to Marcia and the Other Religions

27. In closing, I want to briefly come back to where we started—to the Marcia's of this world. Remember, her statement: "It all sounds so nice, but how do I know it's true? There are so many other explanations out there." It's true, there are a lot of answers out there to God's question to us: "Who do say 'I am'?" Yet, really, there are only two possible answers that have some of truth: We can say either you are *EL Elyon*, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, or you are the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the promise. My guess is that most people, Christians included, are squeamish by this distinction, if for no other reason than how impious it sounds to the ear. Do we have to decide between them? Frankly, the answer is "Yes."

28. Truth be told, all seven of those conclusions about who God is, that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, do make a choice between these two alternatives. And every one of them, one way or another, opted for the God of power and majesty. Indeed, precisely because the God of power and majesty is so pervasive, he can't go unnoticed. Some may praise him, some may berate him, but he doesn't go unnoticed. Indeed, isn't the message in many of our most popular, contemporary, praise songs fixated on the God of power and majesty; and don't they urge us to tap into that power and majesty for our own self-gain? Indeed, aren't the most popular best selling religious books today, like Joel Olsteen's "Your Best Life Yet" or Rick Warren's, "The Purpose Driven Church," fixated on God's power and majesty; and aren't they advising us to tap into that power and majesty for the sake of our own self-help. Indeed, aren't the greatest critics of religion today, intellectuals like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennet, fixated on the God of power and majesty even as they warn us about how irrational the praise of this God is because of the curse of suffering that pervades the world, unaware that the curse of suffering doesn't so much

discredit God as it does their own “will to power.”

29. No. When God asks “Who do say ‘I am’?” the answer matters. It determines our whole standing before God. The outline of the promise is clear from the very beginning: To Abraham God says, “I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you.” To hang our hearts on the promising God is to *have* that promise—the curse of God overruled. To take our chances with the God of power and majesty is to have exactly what that God meets out to a humanity enamored with the “will to power”—the curse remains.

30. So what are we, the latter-day descendents of Abraham, heirs of the promise, to say to the Marcias of this world? Answer, we say exactly what the Promising God did for Abraham: We reiterate the Promise of God over and over and over again. Of course, we can’t do that without confronting an obvious paradox: The God of power (the source of the curse) and the God of promise (the source of the blessing that overthrows the curse) is one and the same God. In the promise given to Abraham, God is saving us from God’s self. Who could have guessed that the working out of this promise in history would entail such an imaginative plan: God the Father, sending God the Son, to bear our curse in the flesh, by dying on a cross? Who would have guessed that in his rising, God the Son would extinguish the curse and establish the blessing that restores us to God’s favor and establishes us as righteous? Who would have guessed that the Father and the Son would send the Holy Spirit to unite us in this great promise by faith born of preaching and sacraments and into a life whose eschatological future bears the fruit of love already? Who would have guessed that the historical working out of the promise to Abraham would have so change the image of who God is that this God now bids us to enter into the promise by immersion into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? Who would have guessed that the only way to give due fear to the God

of power and majesty was by means of true faith in the God of promise who relieves that fear? Marcia, if this promise still seems too good to be true...we understand; but if you'd like to wander with us in it for a while...we'd be delighted.

References:

1 I am quite aware that in Genesis 12:8 that Abraham is accredited with invoking the name of "the Lord," for the first time. But even there, Yahweh, "I Am," is not a "name" as such but more of a reference to that One who is (his existence is not in doubt, but who remains unknown except for the promise he has given Abraham, a promise which signals the in-breaking of a blessing, as opposed to a curse, for the world.

2 A helpful way discussion on this problem is had in Paul Ricoeur's, "A Hermeneutics of Testimony." The article is actually available for free online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1941&C=1773> (10-18-2008).

3 Of course, this development in Israel's social history is itself complicated by their own ingrained "will to power." For remember how Samuel (I Samuel 8:1-22) warns them that their desire to be like all the other nations and have an earthly king is fraught with danger.

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