

Pastoral Theology From an Atheist Who Became a Bishop

Colleagues,

Today's posting is a book review by Robin Morgan. Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Bo Giertz. THE HAMMER OF GOD, revised edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). 335 pp. Paper. Online price: US\$18.

"The Hammer of God" is a fictional look at Lutheran parish life in Sweden from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Bo Giertz, pastor in the Swedish church and eventual bishop of Göteborg Diocese, has been compared to American writer Walt Wangerin for his theological depth and penetrating personal insights. This new edition has been put out to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Giertz' birth.

The book is divided into three novellas which follow the lives of three pastors in Ödesjö parish. Ödesjö is an out-of-the-way district far from Uppsala, yet still caught in the struggles of the respective eras represented by the tenures of these three pastors.

The first story begins in 1808 when Savonius, a young curate, an intellectual and bon vivant, comes face to face with his

inadequacies as a pastor as he is summoned to the bedside of a dying man. All Savonius' academic prowess stands impotent in the face of the eternal consequences of his actions or inactions in that moment. The remainder of the story traces Savonius' maturing process as he grapples with his pastoral responsibilities and his relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second story follows a similar pattern as it begins in 1878 when Fridfeldt, "a child of the revival movement," takes up residence in Ödesjö's parsonage. His story is a particularly interesting snapshot of a young pietistic "true believer" finding his way inside the state church parish in his charge. Again, it's the maturing process in his life, both with regard to his pastoral duties and his internal faith life, that are the common threads throughout the drama of the story.

The third story set between 1937 and 1940 follows Torvik, a product of the "new theological thinking." He arrives in Ödesjö having accepted the "historical view of the Bible, an undogmatic and independent attitude toward the confessions and a warm enthusiasm for the church of his fathers" (p. 197). This story, too, follows Torvik's maturation process from arrogant young curate through parish struggles and dark nights of the soul to wise, conservative elder statesman in the state church.

It seems appropriate to look more closely at this third story because most scholars of Giertz' writings believe that Torvik was a picture of Giertz himself. Hans Andrae, translator of the ninth chapter of this section and writer of the introductory notes, says that "Torvik is the spokesman for Giertz on all issues concerning church and theology" (p. xxx).

As one who looks for the distinction of law and promise in theological writing, I was intrigued by one scene that transpires in Torvik's life early in his tenure at Ödesjö. An

older pastor comes to visit him and shortly their conversation turns to Torvik's lamentation that he is not accomplishing what he set out to do. The older pastor replies, "You must know that when God's work gets started in a man, he will sooner or later experience desperate need, the need that is created by God's Word. Then the situation is the very one you now see: one would, but cannot."

Torvik asks, "But what, then, shall a man do?"

Part of the older pastor's reply is an amazing little tour de force of law and promise explication:

"Let me teach you what you ought to have known long before you stepped into the pulpit. When an individual has been called through the power of the Word – in other words, the very thing that has been happening in this congregation of yours – that person is first enlightened by the law. He understands that there is something called sin that he must be careful to avoid. He becomes obedient, you see. That is the first awakening...But then comes the second awakening by the law, when one sees the miserable condition of one's heart...Then one understands that, with all one's best deeds, one is and remains black as a chimney sweep. Then the danger is serious. A person will then say, either, 'If my condition is so terrible, I may as well wallow in the dirt,' and goes away and sins again. Or he will say, 'I am after all not as black as Karlsson or Lundstrom and their card-playing cronies, since I do not sin intentionally, and surely the Lord must make some distinctions on the last day,' and he goes away and becomes a self-righteous Pharisee and all is lost. Or his eyes are turned from his own miserable condition and he catches sight of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for just such black rascals as himself. And he hears that it is

faith that makes righteous, and not works. That is the enlightenment through the gospel.” (p. 249)

As a glimpse into the lives of three individual pastors within their historical contexts, this book is engaging, both as a work of fiction and as a work of Lutheran theology. However, Giertz’ most profound contribution to my ongoing maturation process as a Lutheran pastor comes from another perspective.

As a mission developer and inner city pastor I struggle to understand why so many within our Lutheran community say that they are committed to reaching beyond our walls to be in mission with others and yet, when it comes right down to it, block the process of mission development (very politely of course, but nonetheless adamantly). Giertz as Torvik makes a remarkably enlightening statement in this regard. Much later in his life, as a well seasoned pastor, Torvik returns to the church building after an excruciatingly painful pastoral moment with his best friend:

“Standing there, he could not help but put his hand half caressingly on the wall and swipe it across one of the large cobblestones that showed its contour underneath the liming. Yes, Arvidsson was right, here was the stronghold. Here was the heavenly city with the firm walls that God had built on the rock Christ, so that it would rise out of the maelstrom of the ages. If one would let go of that stronghold, then one would also be swept away from the rock Christ and be absorbed by the waves” (p. 300).

I realize that Giertz was talking about the church in a broader sense than merely brick and mortar, but I also realize that for some, the brick and mortar have come to substitute for that broader perspective. Maybe I understand some of my fellow

Lutherans a bit better now. They're convinced that we cannot take Jesus out into the maelstrom. We will get lost and this faith that is so important, so bedrock in our lives cannot be split from the traditions. It is in our actions of caring for our facility, in our actions of supporting the community as it has always been, that we know we believe and that the gospel will go on. For me, that is looking at their actions with Philippians 4:8 eyes ("if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things").

The less-than-charitable impulses in me are inclined to say that they just don't want to deal with the mess. I can attest that mission development in the 21st century is messy. There is no blueprint, there is very little money, we make it up as we go along. Yet I have seen God at work over and over again in our midst. I have lived the older pastor's words to Torvik many times over in the year and a half I've been at Faith Place: "You must know that when God's work gets started in a man [sic], he will sooner or later experience desperate need, the need that is created by God's Word. Then the situation is the very one you now see: one would, but cannot." I cannot, but the Lord can.

What of someone like me who claims part of this community because of Jesus, not because of the traditions? Someone like me for whom the Word is the thing? For whom Jesus isn't attached to the walls, but is living, breathing next to me, inside of me, across the globe reaching out with his love for the whole world? Do I have a part in this community that specializes in looking backwards?

Because of Christ, I say YES! Whether my backward-looking, shiva-sitting siblings grieving for the past would agree or not, I am part of this community.

We are no longer the moral arbiters of the status quo. State church-like rules no longer apply. How will we be church at the margins? One of the first orders of business is finding ways to get resources for our work that don't depend on the people who are receiving our services. Middle class self supporting congregations will no longer be the norm. People at the margins tend to have less money than those who embrace the status quo. And it won't be long, is already upon us in many ways, that most moneyed people will not support ministry which is subversive to the status quo. If we are going to be true to Jesus' own pronouncement in Luke 4, we will have to learn how to find resources for our work outside of our normal channels.

"The Hammer of God" is an engaging book that leads to much fruitful thought if one takes the time. It has helped me understand some of my sisters and brothers better and encouraged me to continue carrying this marvelous Word we've been given out into the maelstrom. If I get lost in the process, isn't that what we're called to do?

Robin Morgan