Risking the Tradition

Colleagues:

Walter R. Bouman died six years ago this past August. Walt and I were connected for 50 years. We're on the same Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) graduation photo, class of 1954. We were in cahoots already at the seminary in the tug-of-war about the Bible that was brewing in the Missouri Synod. We were doing doctorates together right after that in Germany—he in Heidelberg with Edmund Schlink, I in Hamburg with Helmut Thielicke. Most significant, he introduced Marie and me to each other, she newly arrived on the seminary library staff (where he was a student part-timer), me his fellow seminarian. His matchmaker mantra: "You've both got the same sense of humor. You deserve each other." And so it came to pass.

In Germany, with Marie and me married, he still single, we did crazy things together during university vacation breaks. A full week in Beyreuth to take in Wagner's entire Ring des Niebelungen. A trip in our Volkswagen microbus to pick up his harpsichord at Sperrhake's instrument factory in Passau. Glacier-gawking in Switzerland. Gruenewald's altar triptych in Colmar, France – with LeCorbusier's joltingly modern "Nun's Hat" chapel nearby. And Salzburg, and Strasbourg, and, and . . . .

And when both of us came home from Germany, each with a dissertation still in progress, I summer-subbed for him in his pastorate at St. Paul's LC, Chatfield, Minnesota so he could get his done. He reciprocated with analogous goodies. We've kept in touch with his widow Jan and she's given permission for me to pass this along to you. It's the final chapter of Walt's first publication, a little book called CHRISTIANITY AMERICAN STYLE. Dayton, Ohio. Geo. A. Pflaum, Publisher. 1970. For the larger story of Walt's life GO

here http://www.wfn.org/2005/08/msg00195.html

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

First off, a few sentences from the Foreword:

“This book is about institutionalized christianity in America. Through historical analysis of anglo-saxon protestantism, the author shows how these churches have overidentifed with American culture. While this identification has built a patriotism and a strong national spirit, it has not allowed religion to play a prophetic role, to criticize political movements, to guide the ambitions of the country.

“Lutheranism and catholicism, on the other hand, since their arrival on this continent, have effectively isolated themselves from the American scene. Separated from cultural movements, they permitted the gospel to grow stale and spend their energies on theological controversies. As a result they are divorced from daily living.

“Such is the state of American christianity. What will its future be?”

Chapter six is Walt’s answer to that question. Written in 1970, it’s 41 years old. But is it really?

Here’s the full table of contents:

1. Crisis in Religion
2. The Protestant Vision
3. The Catholic Experience
4. The Lutheran Enclave
5. The Twentieth Century: Loss of Religious Identity

and then

6. Risking the TraditionThe survey of religion in America has confronted us with problems and possibilities. Protestants risked intense involvement in American culture; and in the process they lost much of their identity, much of the substance of the christian heritage.
   Catholics and lutherans, on the other hand, preserved their identity. They have a heritage rooted in the doctrines, sacraments and structures of the past. However, they paid a price. Neither catholics nor lutherans risked interaction with other christian traditions. Nor did either relate to the dominant American culture. Both groups were concerned with internal problems and their stance was generally defensive, protective. They were intent on keeping their past intact.

   My purpose here is not to pass judgment upon the past. The point is rather, that a defensive and protective stance falls short of christian discipleship and is, in fact, culturally impossible in our present situation. The inadequacy of such a stance is evident from the ministry and teaching of Jesus. He did not come to protect and defend himself, but rather to give himself. “I am among you as one who serves,” he said on the eve of his death (Lk. 22:27).

   Jesus told a parable (Lk. 19:12-28) about the servant who took his master’s money and buried it in the ground because he was afraid of losing it. That which he had been given was taken from him. The faithful servants were those whose discipleship expressed itself in the risk and adventure of encounter. The word to churches with the gift of christian substance is clear. We do not have our tradition in order to preserve it for ourselves. We have

it to be risked in servanthood.

The same message comes from our culture and our world. The risk and adventure of encounter are culturally unavoidable today. Christians and churches cannot maintain the security of cultural isolation. Schools and colleges operated by the churches are not able to screen out the world.

Mobile populations alter the old geographical patterns of American religion. Mass communications media penetrate almost every home and mind. Whether there is official ecumenical conversation or not, there are many indications that catholics and lutherans derive their values and attitudes from protestant or secular neighbors rather than from church teaching.

This kind of cultural interaction is the very essence of the modern era. Although such interaction contains dangers, it also presents opportunities. Have christians really any choice but to engage themselves in their culture?

Shortly after World War II, a bitter young German author, Wolfgang Borchert, wrote a play in which God mumbles to himself, “Nobody pays any attention to me. Nobody cares about me anymore.” Finally Beckmann, the everyman of the play, cries out: “Hasn’t God studied theology? Who is supposed to care about whom?” We may be living in a world which is uncaring about the church and religion in a variety of ways. But the church is called to care about every man. If we have understood our theology, then we are summoned to care.

How shall we risk our tradition? That has really been my question all along. How shall christians invest themselves

in their world? Our path into the twenty-first century is all but impossible to predict. A religious book editor claims that the church of the year 2000 will not be recognizable to anyone of today. If that be true, then we are moving into a future whose shape cannot be guessed from the present. We can, however, examine what we are doing today. The faithfulness with which we live in the present will put any anxieties about the future into perspective (see Mt. 6:33-34).

Ecumenism is a significant part of our present. Anglo-saxon protestants have a relatively long ecumenical experience upon which to build. Lutherans and catholics are newcomers to the ecumenical movement.

Is ecumenism a danger to christian substance? It can be. There is risk, but we have something to risk. We must be discriminating in our ecumenism. The option we have is either to choose to preserve our tradition by avoiding ecumenical encounter or to involve ourselves in the ecumenical movement and lose our tradition. But there is another option open to us. That option becomes evident as we take a closer look at what ecumenism means in the world of today.

The basic feature of the ecumenical climate does not mean an attempt to convert people from one christian denomination to another.

This fact is of enormous significance; it spells the end of suspicion. We no longer need to worry about what sinister motives might lie behind gestures of friendship and cooperation. We no longer have to try to hide our weaknesses and failures from one another. The no-conversion feature of ecumenism indicates respect for one

another. The door to honesty as well as charity is open.

Such an ecumenical climate means that we do not have to suppress our differences and our distinctive traditions for fear of renewing old controversies or reopening old wounds. Valid ecumenism involves our commitment to struggle with each other as brothers, to strive with each other in the honest attempt to bring the intrinsic power of our traditions to bear on one another as individuals and as churches. Ecumenism means that we place our different insights, our concerns and even our controversies into the service of one another.

Unless our ecumenism takes tradition seriously, christianity will betray its own nature. It will become little more than a religious version of the luncheon clubs ostensibly devoted to service. Or, it will use ecumenical cooperation as a thinly disguised effort to form a religious power bloc in order to preserve religion and reassert religious domination over society.

If we struggle with each other in honesty and truth, we will be able to reexamine our traditions. We will be able to assist one another in the reevaluation of our institutions. We will not ask simply how to preserve our institutions. Such a question would mean that we will lose even what we are trying to preserve. Rather, we must ask how our institutions can be expressions of servanthood. “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it,” is a word of Jesus which all four gospels quote (Mk. 8:35 and parallels).

One institution which has been used by lutherans and catholics to preserve religion and culture has been the elementary school. The freedom to evaluate the church’s

whole concept of education should be grasped while it is still an option. Schools of a servant church are not simply agencies for the protection and indoctrination of children in flourishing catholic or lutheran parishes; they are agencies which a servant church might well utilize to meet the urgent needs of overcrowded and underfinanced urban educational systems.

The servant church will seek to renew its secondary schools and colleges. They are not for protection and defense either. The insight of Robert Hassenger is appropriate: such institutions are not a teaching arm of the church, but rather an instance of the church learning. The intersection between christianity and culture can hardly be better cultivated than in an atmosphere where a vital tradition and a vital world are listening to and learning from each other.

The clergy and the hierarchy of the churches are institutions which are once again being summoned to servanthood. Deep in our traditions we have always known that christian people do not exist for the sake of the clergy. Rather, the clergy are there to equip christian people for the work of ministry (see Eph. 4:11-16). The restiveness of the laity or the conflicts between priests and bishops could become destructive power struggles. They could also be occasions for renewal.

Clergy and hierarchy can be threatened only if the freedom and servanthood of the gospel have been suppressed by fear, by love of power or by defense of privilege. Successors to the apostles are addressed by Christ as were the apostles: “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so

among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be servant of all" (Mk. 10:42-44).

The christian tradition gives us a basis for encounter with our world, our culture. Christianity is not an ideology seeking imperialistic victories over other ideologies or scrambling to defend itself when it encounters a hostile environment.

The christian tradition of doctrine, sacraments and structure does not exist for its own sake. We are not called to be museum keepers, custodians of the past. Rather, at the center of the christian tradition is the gospel that happened in Jesus for the world. Every facet of our tradition is a dimension of the good news. St. Mark could summarize Jesus' message with the words, "Repent and believe in the gospel." That is where the power of the christian tradition lies.

REPENT evokes traditional words like SIN and CONFESSION. We have already seen how these words lost their power in American protestantism. The progress which America seemed to be making led to a naive optimism about man. Sin would be eliminated or at least greatly reduced when drunkenness, disease and destitution were vanquished. The kingdom of God would dawn with education and social reform.

REPENTANCE in the sense of becoming a new person was hardly necessary. The course of events indicated how mistaken this was. Corruption and crime did not disappear with prohibition. Exploitation and injustice did not end with the triumph of the labor movement. The war to end war did not end war. Individual problems like marital

breakdown, generational friction, vocational anxiety and emotional illness are matched by the magnitude and apparent insolubility of the great social problems: race, war, population, pollution, prison reform, the aged.

All of these problems are finally related to our need for repentance. Here our tradition, if we take it seriously, urges us to probe more deeply. The christian tradition uses the term ORIGINAL SIN to portray the deepest level of the human predicament. Our original sin is really not very original, but radical. For no matter what we have done, no matter how we are oppressing or exploiting or destroying our world, no matter what privileges we enjoy at another's expense, we defend our action or our situation. We justify ourselves. We find scapegoats to blame or excuses to offer; but we want to think that we are always in the right. We want to protect ourselves, at whatever cost. This is our original sin. This is universal for us as individuals and as institutions. We are defending not just an action, but our very selves. Our identity and our existence depend upon this.

The act of defending reveals our need for self-defense. In fact, this need shows how inescapably religious we are. Where our very self is at stake, there we are practicing our real religion. Whatever we use to defend, protect, excuse or affirm ourselves, that is our god. The gods we make are not God. They cannot defend, excuse, affirm us. Instead we are enslaved by the gods we make. We must serve them, try to blow them up into something they are not. That makes us users, exploiters, destroyers of the people and the things around us.

Our false religions and our false gods are exercises in self-deception and self-destruction. The most enslaving

self-justification takes place in the name of God. That is why repentance is not, in the first instance, what we proclaim to the world. Rather, it is what must daily be happening among us in the church. The tragedy of the biblical pharisees was that they falsified religion. They used the laws, the temple, the rituals of God to defend and excuse themselves. They justified themselves at the expense of the outcast and traitors. They did not repent.

The word of Jesus preserved in the tradition is REPENT. Literally that means “get a new mind,” another way of saying that we must become different people. “Deny yourselves,” said Jesus, which means nothing less than that we give up the self-justifying, excusing, self-defending self, the self propped up by illusory gods. It means that the self deceiving itself with its own self-created affirmations, the enslaved self which exploits and destroys all around it must be destroyed. We are asked to give up the identity we have created for ourselves. Our SELF is being threatened; Jesus is asking nothing less than that we die; impossible.

But Jesus’ word adds, “and believe in the gospel.” He is the embodiment of the gospel. That is in our tradition, too. When we confess that Jesus is God, we are recognizing that what happens in him is a happening of God. What he does to people is God’s doing. Jesus is God’s own YES to those who abandon the affirmations of their own making (II Cor. 1:19). When Jesus meets Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10), he sets him free from his defenses.

Either men believe the gospel or they believe false gospels. that is, either they accept Jesus as God’s YES for them and give up their faith in false gospels; or they do not believe Jesus and continue to be enslaved by false

gospels. Jesus is the gospel because in his death he triumphs over self-justification be letting it do its worst to him. He is the way God bears the pain of human evil. He breaks the power of the old world with its old enslavement and exploitation. He makes possible a new world with new minds toward one another. He calls us to such daily re-NEW-al by meeting us as the risen one in the liberating sacramental life of the christian community.

Holy baptism is entrance into the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the YES of Jesus to us so that we can be plunged into the death of our self-justifications. The defenses and excuses of the old self do not go away with baptism. They remain. But Christ has placed us into the christian community where the struggle between the old mind and the new mind goes on. He commits himself to us. Our parents and godparents commit us to the life-long struggle.

The struggle continues in a venerable act of the tradition: confession and absolution. This tradition can easily be routinized with a mechanical recital of petty code violations. But we are then only cheating ourselves. Like the pharisees, we distort the gifts of God for our own self-contrived justification. The shepherding of the confessor is intended to help us uncover our false faith in false gospels. In repentance we can once again give up the old mind in the act of receiving the new mind. Christ himself affirms us in holy absolution. This is the point of ordination.

The freedom from self-justification is always freedom for service. Christ is the gospel because he does not demand that we serve him. Rather, he is our servant. His servanthood frees us from excusing and defending ourselves so that we can commit ourselves to one another. Sin

isolates us from one another because as sinners we use and exploit one another. The gospel incorporates us into the community of servanthood.

Salvation in Christ is always corporate. That is why the church is so much a part of the tradition. We celebrate the corporate character of salvation in the meal of the christian community. Christ incorporates us into his body by sharing his self-giving servanthood with us and freeing us for self-giving servanthood in the world. The church happens when the meal of his body and blood happens. From the meal we are sent to corporate servanthood in the world.

The christian community cannot retreat from the problems and agonies of the world. What the tradition calls original sin illuminates the enslaving power at work in the corporate evils pervading our culture. It helps us recognize the excuses and defenses with which we try to cover up the exploitation and destruction taking place. But one does not have to be a christian to uncover this posturing and self-deception.

The false hopes raised by revolutionaries as well as the false securities promised by reactionaries can be exposed by those who look realistically at the pretense behind the slogans. But without the gospel there is no new mind. There is only cynicism or despair.

One who repents and believes in the gospel can take up the problems day after day because he knows that fullness of joy, final freedom and flourishing humanity are God’s desire and promise. He can work on even when he knows that relative solutions will not usher in the final kingdom. They are not the gospel. They do not redeem. But they help

to stave off disaster. They contribute to another day's survival. And that's a lot at this point in the world's history.

The tradition does not mean that we abandon this world in favor of the world to come. Instead the tradition frees us to work in this world, to intersect with its culture, heart and soul. That is how we are "faithful in a very little" (Lk. 16:10). Only when we live faithfully in this world can we hear validly the promise of resurrection and everlasting life in a world to come.

There is a lot of religion in America, some of it true, some false; some of it enslaving, some liberating. The bearers of the christian tradition are called to discriminate, to choose among the religions. That is how we risk the tradition. Unless we do this, we will not experience the power of repentance and faith in the gospel.