

The World Trade Center Revisited

Colleagues,

This week's posting comes from Walter Bouman, a dear friend and theological buddy. Walt and I have known each other for over half a century starting with our time together as seminary students in 1950ff, then our doctoral studies in Germany in the mid-fifties, and a generation later on the ramparts in the Wars of Missouri. We've travelled different routes but find ourselves linked in common confession of the Augsburg-Catholicism of the Lutheran Reformation.'Course we continue to argue about just what that means. For example, Walt's spirituality description at the outset of his report below needs "a little work," I tell him, in the very first sentence. He articulates the "biggie" of the work of Jesus, the Christ, to be that he has "defeated the powers driven by death." That is indeed true, but. . . .

Many of you ThTh readers will not be surprised that I urge Walt to see an even "deeper malady," deeper even than death. Christ trumped this one too, so the deeper good news is that he has "abrogated God's critique of sinners." So we go round and round. But we're in the same ballpark.

Most of all I'm the beneficiary of Walt Bouman's advice to a pert young librarian at Concordia Seminary in 1951 named Marie: "You ought to get to know Ed Schroeder. The two of you have the same sense of humor." And then, sotto voce I imagine: "You deserve each other!" Well she did, and later we did, and in a few days, d.v., it's our 47th anniversary. But that's doubtless more than you really wanted to know. Here's Walt's unedited text.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

The World Trade Center Revisited

I am in New York City for three weeks teaching at The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church. My course is entitled "Spirituality and Social Justice." It is one of four courses being offered this Summer term by The Center for Christian Spirituality. The director of the Center, Dr. Jonathan Linman, is an ELCA pastor, a friend, and an alumnus of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, where I am Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology.

The course description is as follows:

"One definition of Christian spirituality is trust in the crucified and risen Jesus, the Christ, as the one who has defeated the powers driven by death. Such spirituality frees persons for engagement with the world in behalf of social justice. The course will explore the foundations for Christian attention to social justice as well as the challenge of involvement in the political, economic, and personal dimensions of the quest for social justice."

I have five class periods set aside for "case studies." One case study compares the contrasting responses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Helmuth von Moltke to Naziism in the 1940s. Von Moltke believed that Hitler was God's judgment on Germany and his "Kreisauer Kreis" simply gave thought to how Germany could be reconstituted after Hitler. He refused to have "any

connection with the use of violence." He was tried for "defeatism" and executed on January 23, 1945. At his trial Judge Roland Freisler told him, "Count von Moltke, Christianity and we National Socialists have one thing in common, and one thing only: we claim the whole man." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When a madman is tearing through the streets in a car, I can, as a pastor who happens to be on the scene, do more than merely console or bury those who have been run over. I must jump in front of the car and stop it." He was tried for his complicity in the plot against Hitler and executed on April 9, 1945.

One case study deals with the social justice issues involved in the medical case of Karen Quinlan, a young woman who was kept alive for twelve years (1975-1987) although she never regained consciousness after she lapsed into a coma from a combination of barbituates and alcohol. Her parents and family wanted to remove life-support systems, but her Roman Catholic physician at a Roman Catholic hospital refused to do so (although her priest concurred with the family) despite court rulings in a complex legal process.

One case study deals with a column by Raymond J. Keating, a LC-MS layman writing for "Newsday." The column was reprinted by Editor Russell Saltzman of "Forum Letter." It criticizes the ELCA's Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs (LOGA) for its involvement in support of a congressional bill to increase the minimum wage because, in Keating's view, it would price low income workers out of jobs. The column also criticizes LOGA involvement in global warming, "environmental racism/classism," gun control, affirmative action, globalization and trade, affordable housing, the earned income tax credit, Head Start, Low Income Home Energy Assistance, Medicare, food stamps, international debt relief, and transportation policy. Keating supports the LC-MS policy statement on separation of church and state because "the mission and ministry of Christian

congregations is to preach and spread the Gospel," not get involved in controversial issues that divide, politicize, and corrupt the church.

The final two case studies will deal with justice issues involved in the events of September 11. In the first case study the class will look at the commandeering of four planes by Muslims from Saudi Arabia and Egypt because of the perceived injustice of the United States in its Middle East policies of support for Israel against the cause of the Palestinians. In the second case study the class will look at the response of the US "war" against terrorism in the light of the "just war" doctrine of Augsburg Confession Article 16 and the defense of the "civil sword" against evil doers in Article 37 of the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion.

In preparation for these case studies, the class members went to the offices of Trinity Episcopal Church, located just a block from the World Trade Center, on the morning of June 19. We got off the subway at Church Street, emerging with the vast cavity where the WTC stood directly on our right, and the fence surrounding St. Paul's Chapel directly on our left. We walked down Church Street through crowds of New York life on our side of the street and the silence of death on the other side of the street. In a few blocks we came to 74 Trinity Place, a 40 story office building.

There we heard a three-hour presentation on the experience of three Trinity staff members, Dr. Courtney Cowert, a former student of mine when I taught at General in the 2000 Michaelmas Term and now director of grants at Trinity parish, Dr. Frederic Burnham of Trinity Institute, and the Rev. Lyndon F. Harris, a doctoral candidate in ecclesiology on the pastor staff. On the morning of September 11, when the first plane crashed into the WTC, all three were at the offices of the parish on the 21st

floor of 74 Trinity Place, where the north windows look out on the site of the WTC. With them was Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Wales, in NYC for some lectures. On that morning he was scheduled to make a video tape on Christian spirituality for Trinity Institute together with a number of Anglican teachers of spirituality.

They went down to the 4th floor studio and there began to learn that the crash was no accident. The police directed them to go with those who gathered for the taping session out into the stair well, but not into the street. While they were in the stair well, the first tower collapsed and the air in the stair well began to be so polluted that breathing became difficult. Fred Burnham said that he and others became convinced that they were going to die from the smoke and fumes and dust. One of the persons who had come for the taping session said to Williams, "If we are going to die, I am glad I am dying with you." Williams embraced her and led them in prayer. Fred said that it occurred to him how good it was to be dying in company with friends and colleagues instead of dying alone.

Some 15 to 20 minutes after they had been directed to the stair well the police began evacuating them from the building. They emerged into a surreal atmosphere of four inches of snow-like dust on the ground and a totally polluted environment. The second tower collapsed as they were trying to make their way south and east away from the WTC, and they were enveloped in a black cloud of smoke, dust, and debris. None of them knew how they survived, but survive they did. Rowan Williams scrapped his lectures and reflected on his experience, now published by Eerdmans under the title, "Writing in the Dust."

And the next day the staff people were back at St. Paul's Chapel, directly across Church Street from the WTC and a part of Trinity Parish, now involved in the 8 month mission of care

for the police, the fire personnel, and the construction (deconstruction) workers at “ground zero.” Their presentation about this mission was entitled “9/12.”

Following are some random notes that I took as I watched their absorbing slides and listened to their powerful and moving narratives. Fred Burnham began with a quotation from a poem by Leonard Cohen: “The blizzard of the world crossed the threshold and overturned the order of the soul.” Fred described how resources and basic organization at St. Paul’s began to emerge out of the chaos-like creation! People brought food, clothing, medical supplies. Soon there was a “Broadway Burger Brigade” as students from General Seminary brought a dozen Weber grills and began to make hamburgers on the street outside the entrance to St. Paul’s Chapel, a block east of the WTC. In a bit of humor Fred told the story of how a mission of compassion ran afoul of the institutional bureaucracy. The Health Department came and began to close down the impromptu food services for lack of a license. But the police officers needed the food, and simply surrounded the Health Department inspectors and walked them away from the chapel. Eventually restaurants licensed by the Health Department came to the rescue and provided a legal canopy (as well as lots of donated food) for the food operation, which served more than half a million meals over the next 8 months.

Soon everything moved inside the chapel. St. Paul’s is the oldest religious building in continuous service on Manhattan Island. But it is just that: a chapel. There is no parish hall, no undercroft, nothing but altar, pulpit, organ, pews. That space was pressed into service. The newly painted walls began to be covered with greetings and prayers from the nation and the world. A volunteer from the Episcopal University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, organized greeting and directional services. There were tables for food, medical supplies,

clothing. An Episcopal woman from North Carolina got a manufacturer to send 800 pairs of boots because the heat and debris was destroying the foot wear of the workers. Medical volunteers, including podiatrists, chiropractors, massage therapists, offered their welcome services. Cots were set up for workers to sleep.

Courtney Cowert reported on interviews with five persons in one day. The supervisor of crane operators remembered saying the 23rd Psalm to himself as he first walked to the site. "Life is a gift which we must all give away. The only questions are when and how." A policeman: "God can make neighbors out of strangers." A volunteer: "There is a beauty to living our lives this way. It should be like this every day." As I listened to Courtney narrate the words from her interviews, I noticed how powerful are the fragments (and more) of memorized hymns, liturgy, Bible, and catechism.

Lyndon Harris began his presentation on the ecclesiological character of this mission by quoting Emil Brunner: "The church exists by mission the way a fire exists by burning." In the midst of all of the activity at the chapel, there was Eucharist every day with people coming from all over the building and from the street to commune. The regularly scheduled music concerts were replaced by unscheduled appearances of a great variety of musicians. Lyndon showed slides of violinists, pianists (playing on a superb Steinway), string quartets, etc., playing for volunteers and workers availing themselves of the service provided by the volunteers. Of course the regular Sunday services were not available to the parishioners. One of them asked, "When is St. Paul's going to be a church again?" Obviously not realizing that it was never more church than during these 8 months.

I asked myself what gifts the Episcopal Church had for just

this mission. There is the simple fact that it is THERE, the only Christian buildings right there at Wall Street and the site of the WTC. There is its familiar liturgy, celebrated with Anglican aplomb and “stiff upper lip” in the midst of chaos and works of mercy. There is its national network of establishment types who can mobilize supplies and services. Christians from other traditions and non-Christians joined them in large numbers, and my Episcopal friends are grateful for that. I’m grateful to be in communion with them.

Walter Bouman

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