

Theology Matters

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When Theology Burns

by Richard A. Ray

So here is the dare. An historical text unknown to you in the past lies within reach. You pick it up, begin to read it, plug it into your brain, and jolts from the literary lithium-ion battery begin to do some strange things within your mind and your social world. It is the gift of an electric intellectual arch. You walk beneath it into a different world. You complete your reading, begin again, and more curious possibilities come to your attention. One thing becomes completely clear in the process. Christianity has always been mesmerized by words.

I had bought it several years earlier. Then one day I picked up the volume entitled *Showings* by the fourteenth century nun, Julian of Norwich. I browsed through it, read it again, read it repeatedly, and then began to pick it apart. Phrase by phrase, word by word. I looked at the ways in which her words were joined together until I uncovered the subtle clues to the soteriological convictions that are buried in the oddities of her text. And then I asked myself the question, "Just how far was I going to allow this nun to change the ways in which I thought?"

It wasn't the only time. A person that I had recently met, a book publisher, reached into the display case of the books that he had on exhibit. He selected a volume by the late Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky. It was entitled *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. "Here, take this book. I believe that I should give it to you." Similar words that I came to hear more than once in the years that lay ahead. I gratefully accepted it but allowed it to lie inert, remaining caged in some form of dormant book type hibernation in my own bookcase for several years.

Then one day, for no apparent reason, my attention was drawn to it. "I really ought to take a look into that unusual book," I thought. I took it in hand, sat down with it, and began reading page after page. In a short period of time, the suggestive theological prose began to arrest my attention. There was no doubt about it.

This book had emerged from a relatively unfamiliar theological and liturgical tradition. I found that it was introducing me to an entirely different way of understanding the theologians of the early church. It provided a remarkable contrast with the university-oriented context in which a person like Harnack had lived and done his research. For some time I kept the book close at hand. It was not easy to enter into that mystically charged world. I wrote in the margins and underlined the sentences that were most intriguing. Then when I had finished I went to the computer and placed an order for everything in English that Lossky had ever written. Deceased for decades, in the lingering flow of his prose, he had become a mentor who had become startlingly different for me from my old literary companions like Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs.

I seem to have a history of literary entanglements. While it originated in childhood, it began to move into more compelling involvements when I was in college.

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It could take me into its grip almost anywhere. To put one instance into a particular setting, an aunt who lived with her husband deep in the countryside of south Georgia, had a remarkable personal library. One day while I was there, she apparently caught me gazing pointlessly out the window at some pine trees. She stepped across the room to a bookshelf, looked at the volumes, and drew one out that was by the German/American theologian, Paul Tillich. In the words that would later become somewhat similar to others she said, "Here take this book. I think that you might find it interesting." Of course I found it to be a lot more than just interesting. Like a spark struck from our literary lithium-ion battery, it set on fire some heretofore slumbering place within my brain. For several years I could not get enough of Tillich's books. I proceeded to acquire all of his publications in English, waiting with a starved intellectual appetite for each new one that came off of the press. I am quite sure that I quit looking at the pine trees about that time.

There were still more ways of reading the texts that had been lying beneath the icy surface of my intellectual winter, waiting to be engaged. And this was a remarkable discovery. From the very beginning Christianity was bedazzled by the various ways in which the gospel had found expression. From Origin to Ambrose to Bernard, from Augustine to Aquinas words used within theological discourse were quickly becoming multivalent. And one other thing was also becoming clear to me. In theological use, words had more fluidity and less neutrality than I had imagined. This meant, of course, that nothing could interfere with reading the original sources. In fact, the most important step was moving further from the analytic and constructive books of creative theologians, such as the ones by Tillich and Lossky, and directly into the sources which had informed them. It would be more like reading the work of Julian of Norwich herself.

Primary writings, the basic documents themselves were beckoning. I had already been drawn by the sources that were read by such figures as Luther and Calvin. Since they had read them, would they not provide the keys to opening the doors of their minds? Could I in good conscience assume that I should somehow simply kidnap historic writers verbally and move them from their own intellectual environment into mine? Would not the concept of justification by faith, for instance, bear different nuances in a secularized twenty-first century culture than it would to a German monk who had been reading Augustine in the sixteenth century? Perhaps by reading their own sources I would understand more deeply what had influenced them and how they had thought.

In the process of going further into it, however, I found that books in other fields had their own way of reinforcing my surmise. This was even true when it came to general literature in music. Such works could provide historical narrative and illuminating biographical information but they seemed to be more suggestive than compelling. Understandably, they would only point me to the real thing. I could not take anyone's interpretive words as substitute for listening to the music itself. I had been given a copy of Aaron Copeland's *What to Listen for in Music*. Perhaps it would help me to know what I was hearing. So I launched out. I was not far into this volume, however, before I began to feel that, as informative as it might be, it was certainly not music. It explained it, but one thing was certain, it did not sing. The same thing happened when I purchased a book on Bach. It offered clarity, but the joy of Bach was not to be found there. I set them both aside and turned back to the music itself.

Frankly, while I could listen to the music of Bach for itself or pick up the ancient tomes and read the original sources for themselves, I was conscious that I was not actually coming to terms with them as well as I might. In a similar way, one could say that *while theology mattered the question was did it actually matter to me personally all that much?* Would I become one among the many, for instance, who had written their papers, passed their exams, finished their courses, and asserted that theology mattered but who had rarely picked up a work by Bernard or by Martin Luther again? Could I really get away with just slipping on someone else's intellectual and homiletical armor? I was becoming increasingly aware that the challenge of the gospel is to the transformation of our minds as well as our hearts.

When a stimulus arrived, it was not in the way that I expected. Somehow I obtained a volume by the comparative ethnologist who taught at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade, a Romanian by birth. Let the symbolic thought of the ancient myths and stories speak for themselves, he urged. The mystery, the meaning, lies hidden within them, waiting for the reader who is truly attentive. One must learn how to listen to the ancient words. And listen I did. Especially to Eliade himself. As was usual in my case, I read it all. He led me away from Bultmann's assumptions into a new recognition that words themselves carry an irreducible historic weight. When I happened to be in Chicago I looked him up. And in due time wrote an article on his thought.

Actually, far earlier than I had realized, the most influential theologians had already begun to listen very closely to the primary sources. In the sixteenth century, late in this process, Teresa of Avila left us an example. Her uncle, Don Pedro had been grieving over the death

of his wife. So he withdrew from his business affairs to a quiet retreat. And then, drawing from his own library, he began to read the devotional theologians and to seek solace from them. In time Teresa came by to visit him. She had endured her own discouragements. In due course, he handed her a volume and more or less said to her, "Here, read this, you might find it interesting." His words would have certainly had a familiar ring to me. And then he gave her Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*.¹ Teresa apparently read it carefully and listened to the words in a contemplative mood. As she described it in her autobiography, reading this volume had eventually contributed to her leadership of the sixteenth century Spanish spiritual renewal.

Francisco himself was a deeply read and devout Spanish monk. I had bought a copy of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* years before and had promptly red shirted it and placed it on the reserve team. When I finished reading about Teresa and her uncle, however, I, as it were, called it up and read it as closely as I could for myself. The links were incredible. Francisco had read, among many others, the works of John Ruusbroec, a mystical writer who had died in 1381. He had—so had I been told by a Ruusbroec researcher—written such works as *The Sparkling Stone*, in something called Middle Flemish. I had, naturally, been trying to read his work in English.

I was coming to the place in which I believed that the only time in which theology really mattered was when people provided a hospitable place within the warp and woof of their lives for the books themselves. And by taking them into one's life a communion of the saints can sometimes be found, transcending time and place and suggesting a more metaphysical presence than might be commonly known. Looked at in a different way, the very words could become passports into the writers' souls. By just lingering, even over the way in which a gerund had been used, one was listening to the voices of real people. I was feeling my way into the authors' lives. The whole business was becoming extraordinarily personal. And that was beginning to suggest that theology mattered when I walked through the door into the very private reasons for another's faith. *Theology matters because it has such intensely personal roots and intensely communal depths.* Here was the hint about one of the distinctive mysteries of Christian theology. *It is unapologetically relational.*

While it might seem to be academic or even abstract, it is redolent with the most personal and communal echoes. Even the creeds are something like treasure chests containing the strangest of personal things. When one combines the solitary dimension of the meditative life with that which is communal and historic, across the slender arch of God's grace, sparks

begin to leap up. In the heart of its rhetoric, theology can be personal and incandescent.

Richard Rolle had his own particular way of entering into this mystery. After several years of study, he dropped out of Oxford University. And soon after, in approximately 1302, he became a hermit of a somewhat familiar type. He wrote, he taught, he became an unofficial spiritual director to a community of nuns. And in his work entitled *The Fire of Love* he wrote this: "I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too . . . as some might well remind us, there are people on fire with love for Christ."² There remained a sense of community, even for a hermit. Among many others who lived both in the early and middle years of the Christian church, Rolle's life does remind us that theology can grow deeper to the degree that it has a discipline of asceticism some place within it.

Many of the seminal spiritual works were written by those who knew some sense of a dialectic between solitude and community. These works occasionally originated in preparation for homilies in a monastery, as did Brevard's meditations on "The Song of Songs," but they frequently included also a very sensitive invitation to join in contemplative union with either Christ or the Trinity. A sense of union with the Trinity that can be experienced and imagined, even revered in a distant way, is a little daunting. Yet historical theology does bring with it witnesses that the doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in contemplative prayer, Biblical study, and liturgy. This can become very experiential and personal. Thus, contrary to what some have thought about it, theology matters when it is found to be full of personal surprises. There is more intellectual adventure here than some critics might think at first. And the recognition that it can deliver its own conceptual clarity can be sometimes more than a little surprising.

If theology has these ambient dimensions, should we sometimes attempt to read it within a context that is similar to the one in which it was written? Do we try to drink from the same silver cup into which it has been poured? The question becomes particularly acute when we read theology that has a dimension of the mystical about it. And if it were written within a context of solitary contemplation as well as within worship, how could such a setting be readily found? To put it in more familiar terms what might happen if we read it primarily as we prayed? It might be helpful at this point to remember that the horizon for theology is not merely historical but eternal. In the largest sense of the word, it moves beyond the origin of the cosmos itself.

It occurred to me one day, like a cool breeze blowing across my brow, that there are subtle differences in the ways in which I have read works in theology. When I was in the pastorate, I had read both Scripture and theology one way. When I was involved in teaching undergraduates I had read them another way. When I was the director of a publishing house I had read them in a different way. And when I was engaged in theological education, I had read them in a still different way. And now I was reading them, when family time permitted, more often in solitude, glad for the deep companionship that comes out of the texts. Do the social contexts in which we read theology have an effect on the way in which we read it?

How wise the Protestant Reformers had been, who, in their own time, recognized that no single context, no single institution has the right of the final interpretive judgment of a text. Not a single one. Not the magisterial authority of the Pope, not the councils, and not the universities. It was, in retrospect, a remarkably fluid insight. And it might still offer food for thought for those of us who look to accepted authorities for our views. For Calvin, who cited Augustine hundreds of times in *The Institutes*, it might have been with a slight sense of tension, that he adopted the formula of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to the Word, allowing for a subtle ambivalence for the “Word” which could move toward both Christ and the text itself. It did not appear natural for him to separate them. And thus they held that the exposition of a Biblical text was an absolutely essential component of Christian worship. With no hesitation, the Reformers held that the Fathers had served as the most inspired interpreters for the church. Even so, they were also assured by their own experience and conviction that no one institution held an interpretive hegemony. The study of Scripture and theology is far too dynamic for that. And as it stands, like it or not, we find ourselves to be left with the inescapable terror of the bare text.

And here is where the final question leads us. All of our observations have been gathering momentum, leading us to wonder about the ways in which, at its core, theology is rooted in and inflamed by the highly

personal and communal character of its life. Although it sometimes seems to disguise this in its weighty volumes, theology can mean the most to us when it invokes the spirit of the living and the memories of the dead. In a sense, it awakens us, as we begin to listen more deeply, to our own reliance on the communion of the saints.

The whole thing is so kinetic that it points us toward a willingness to enter theological reflection as into a dare, even to find new friends among the departed who will be truly gifted to us in love one day. And in this sense, it could be said that reading theology is always uniquely eschatological. And here is that remaining question: could I, in the final analysis, find the smoldering embers in this text for myself? Am I invited, in a time and place, to, with assistance from my own heritage of faith, walk alone into that journey where that lithium-ion battery of an unexpected text sets my heart on fire? And if it seemed to take too long, could I just wait in patience before the words that I have never understood? Could I go to the golden cage of the bookshelves where the books sit like song birds waiting for me, open the doors, turn them loose and let them begin to sing? The answer is yes.

We might conclude with one more mysterious fire, not actually a battery, too volatile for that, type of story. It holds, however, merely a simple observation. As the familiar text tells us, Moses went away from the crowd into the wilderness. And there he came to a bush that burned incessantly like no other. He stood alone before the burning bush. And then, both parties begin to speak. That is precisely when theology begins to burn.

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¹ Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (London, Penguin Books, 1972), 45.

² Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, trans. Mary E. Giles (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).

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Orthodoxy at Stake

by Joseph D. Small

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have communion with us, and truly our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things to you so that our joy may be complete.” 1 John 1:1–4

“In general, the churches . . . bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.”

John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*¹

For over a century, a small gem has been embedded in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*: the “Great Ends of the Church.” Six great purposes of the church’s life—the life of every congregation and of the whole denomination—present Presbyterians with markers for the character of our life together, pointing to basic works of the church that are foundational to who the church is and what the church is called to do. The Great Ends of the Church are:

- proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- maintenance of divine worship;
- preservation of the truth;
- promotion of social righteousness; and
- exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

The Great Ends of the Church express direction for faith and mission with a clarity and substance that is rarely found in the isolated, temporary products of church councils and committees. Perhaps that is why the church regularly ignores them when devising its endless string of vision statements, priorities, goals, and objectives.

The Great Ends of the Church are not a collection of disconnected items, but a holistic vision of the church’s life. A church cannot be faithful to the intention of the

great ends by choosing to emphasize some while downplaying others. There can be no evangelism apart from demonstrating life within God’s rule, and no living the gospel without proclaiming the gospel. No care for ourselves without care for the world, and no justice apart from personal relationships. No worship that neglects truth, and no theology without praise and prayer. None of the great ends is independent of the others, and each depends on its relation to the others.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

Even so, I want to direct attention to the middle two: maintenance of divine worship and preservation of the truth. Unlike the others, these two sound a somewhat defensive tone. The bold language of the others—*proclamation, nurture, promotion, and exhibition*—gives way to mild defense—*maintenance and preservation*—as if divine worship and truth were endangered, at risk, in need of protective measures. Who can doubt it? Worship and truth are always imperiled by cultural and religious accretions and accommodations. Maintenance and preservation are the church’s constant task.

Maintenance of divine worship does not mean the conservation of worship that is *simply divine*, of course, but rather the continuance of the worship *of God*. In institutionalized, market-driven, entrepreneurial churches, it is precisely the worship of the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, that is in danger of being engulfed in a sea of functional Unitarianism, pop therapy, and institutional self-promotion. The danger is not confined to mega churches, or liberal churches, or careless churches. Every pastor, including the most faithful, is aware of the hazard. In a fragmented ecclesial landscape of competing denominations and congregations, the temptation is ever-present to stir into the liturgical mix a little—or more than a little—self-help, entertainment, group-building, and organizational promotion.

Worship is not all about us. Neither is worship about the church. Sustaining congregations in the worship of *God* is a primary task of the church. Focused devotion to God is not accomplished simply by using the *Lutheran Book of Worship* or the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* or the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (although they help). The whole liturgy—including music, the reading of Scripture, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, preaching, and even announcements—

must draw congregations into praise of the living God who seeks and creates communion with us through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Reformed tradition has always been aware that worship can drift away from God toward preoccupation with ourselves. Gratitude for God's grace can be displaced by what worship can do to fulfill us. Calls to worship, hymns, prayers, and sermons can become words about us rather than proclamation of the Triune God who creates and sustains all things, who reconciles the world to himself, who leads us into truth and faithfulness. Even the sacraments can be reduced to chummy celebrations of human community.

Thus, it is no accident that in the Great Ends of the Church maintenance of divine worship precedes preservation of the truth, and that both are placed at the center:

maintenance of divine worship//preservation of the truth

lex orandi//lex credendi

rule of praying//rule of believing

the church's worship shapes the church's belief.

The faith of most Christians is shaped more by the weekly gathering around font, table, and pulpit than by all the church's other programs and activities. The old Latin pairing also works the other way around, of course—*lex credendi//lex orandi*—which is why the truth of the gospel must shape word and sacrament, prayer and praise, in order to maintain divine worship, worship of the living God. Worship and truth form a Möbius strip of continuous interaction.

Orthodoxy, *orthōs doxa* (right belief) is intimately connected to *orthōs doxadzō* (right praise). Orthodoxy's primary significance does not lie in its distinction from heresy, but in its lived truth within worshiping congregations. Orthodoxy is at stake every Lord's Day in every congregation, not only, or even primarily, in the actions of denominational councils (although the actions of councils are secondary elements in the formation or malformation of believers' faith and life). Focus on the real and perceived departures from "right belief" of national churches should not divert attention from the character of proclamation and teaching in congregations.

Orthodoxy at Risk

In the church as well as beyond it, orthodoxy is too often regarded as inflexible adherence to rigid, doctrinaire concepts. It is seen as the reverse of tolerance and open-mindedness. Orthodoxy in politics, science, the arts, and most other human endeavors is

seen as the enemy of inquiry, discovery, modernization, and progress. This negative assessment has now been joined by a naïve appropriation of the "hermeneutics of suspicion." A well-known Presbyterian blogger recently posted an entry extolling the virtues of heterodoxy rather than orthodoxy. In his post he equated heterodoxy with diversity and orthodoxy with uniformity, going on to say that: "It is also important to remember that 'orthodoxy' was established by the winners of human debates, not handed down to us from on high." He added, "The same goes for the contents of the biblical canon, for that matter."

It has become fashionable to say that "history is written by the winners," and therefore we must recover the suppressed voices of defeated minorities. Elaine Pagels, for instance, contends that gnostic gospels were suppressed and forcibly eliminated by an ecclesiastical apparatus that would not tolerate the idea that people could find God by themselves. She also asserts that the recently discovered, so-called "Gospel of Judas" contradicts everything we have known about Christianity, presenting us with a version of history and of beliefs that is more in tune with modern struggles than the doctrines imposed at Nicaea.

It is true enough that history's winners shape the future, and it is true enough that winning does not always indicate veracity or righteousness. But "winners of human debates" often win, sometimes after long struggles, because their views come to be recognized as true and just. Who would assert that we should recover the discredited voices of racism, embodied in European pogroms, South African apartheid, and American segregation? Who would contend that the "orthodoxy" of racial equality is simply a viewpoint established by the winners of a human debate who now suppress and eliminate the misunderstood voice of racial bias?

Orthodoxy—right belief—does not imply narrow uniformity. Even the triumph of human equality over racism does not suppress discussion by imposing rigid constraints on all expression about matters of race. Are reparations due to African Americans for centuries of slavery? Does affirmative action promote racial justice or perpetuate racial divides? How should public schools best ensure racial diversity? What immigration policies are appropriate? All of these questions and more are discussed within the orthodoxy of racial equality embedded in law and embraced in custom.

Do racists still exist in America? Does racial bias lurk beneath the surface? Of course, but we do not see racists as history's unfortunate losers whose convictions must be recovered and understood lest they be eliminated by a legal apparatus that cannot tolerate the idea that some races are superior to others.

Christian orthodoxy is not the inverse of Christian diversity. Lutherans and Reformed have had a few differences over the years; Reformed and Anglican churches cannot agree on appropriate forms of episcopé; and Reformed, Lutherans, and Episcopalians differ from Baptists on the theology and practice of Baptism. However, aside from a few zealots in our midst, we do not label one another “heretics,” and we recognize that diversities can be encompassed within a generous orthodoxy of Christian faith and life. Christian diversity is not an achievement of our (post) modernity, but an abiding feature of Christian faith and life. Tertullian voiced the relationship between orthodoxy and diversity at the conclusion of his rendition of the *regula fidei*: “Provided the essence of the Rule is not disturbed, you may seek and discuss as much as you like.”²²

And yet, within each of our churches, orthodoxy is “at stake.” I cannot speak for Lutherans or Anglicans, of course, but in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other Reformed churches in North America “orthodoxy at stake” is not simply a matter of competing parties—one orthodox while the other is ... what? ... heterodox? ... heretical? ... apostate? The real issue is a diminished commitment among pastors and other church leaders to serious, sustained attention to the faith, and thus a waning of shared theological conviction throughout the church. Orthodoxy is “at stake” among evangelicals as well as progressives, among LGBT opponents as well as proponents.

What is orthodoxy? Not the Westminster Confession, the Augsburg Confession, or the Thirty-nine Articles. Its roots are much deeper. Orthodoxy’s trajectory was shaped at Nicaea and refined at Constantinople. It was there that the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of “right belief” was articulated, establishing the rubrics for our talk about God. The Creed does not say everything there is to be said, but it establishes the margins within which the theological life of the church lives and moves. The Creed is dogma, which gives shape to the church’s ongoing theological work. Colin Gunton’s metaphor indicates both constraints and freedoms in the church’s ongoing theological task: “dogma is that which delimits the garden of theology, providing a space in which theologians may play freely and cultivate such plants as are cultivable in the space which is so defined.”²³

While it might be difficult to find Presbyterian ministers who would abandon the Nicene garden by explicitly and publically rejecting the Creed’s affirmations, it would be distressingly easy to locate ministers whose preaching and teaching have little to do with the Creed’s foundational truth.

Whatever may be the ecclesial failings or theological shortcomings of some in our churches, orthodoxy cannot be reduced to a slogan that is used to denigrate or castigate them. The task is not simply to criticize “the other side” for “abandoning the faith of the church,” but to identify differences constructively and articulate orthodox convictions faithfully. In the PCUSA, genuine theological differences are too often reduced to slogans and political struggles, complete with party platforms, legislative schemes, campaign strategists, and lobbyists . . . all leading to the tallying of votes. Our task, and the task of those with whom we disagree, is to be fully aware of the theological and moral issues involved, and to engage one another in persistent, protracted dialogue. It is not enough to expound favorite themes within our own circles of conviction. It is necessary that we articulate our beliefs, and listen to the beliefs of others so that the differences (and agreements) between us become clear to all.

Nicaea and Us

Thus it was in the great controversy leading to Nicaea. Ordinary Christians, as well as priests and bishops, came to understand that what was at stake was the very knowledge of God. Specifically, the issue was the unity of the Son with the Father. The alternatives were stark. Is the Son fully God, commensurate with the Father? Or is the Son subordinate to the Father, a created being that is only “divine” in a subsidiary sense? Although the issue was theological, the debate was not abstract, for the matter went to the heart of Christians’ understanding of God, their own salvation, and the character of Christian existence.

Could Christians believe that the Son was truly God, and therefore trust that the salvation announced and accomplished in Jesus Christ was God’s gracious will? Or was the Son something less than God, so that God’s will remained mysterious—an uncertain purpose behind, above, and beyond the words and deeds of Jesus Christ? Were men and women “in Christ” thereby reconciled to God? Or was there another step that had to be taken in order to be reconciled to the still-hidden God who dwelt behind Christ? Had God come to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ? Or had God remained aloof, only sending an emissary?

Twenty-first century theological differences are not drawn along “orthodox/Arian” lines, yet the stakes are similar. The unity of God—Father Son and Holy Spirit—is the essential guarantee that we are able to know God truly. If Jesus Christ is not truly God as well as truly human, then he is merely one path toward a god who remains essentially unknown. Similarly, if the Spirit is not the Holy Spirit of God, then our deepest spiritual experience is not an encounter with the one true God, but only an approach to a god who remains

essentially distant. Now, as then, the church's knowledge of God depends on its understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and on its affirmation of the one true God—Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Note that the second article of the Nicene Creed has two distinct parts: a series of theological affirmations that confesses the full divinity of the only-begotten Son of the Father Almighty, and a narrative of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord (*incarnation* that is not limited to Jesus' conception and birth, but encompasses his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again). The hinge that links the two is the very good news that it is all "*for us and our salvation.*" Our salvation centers on the reality that the Son of God is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father" and that "he came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human." A Jesus Christ less than God or less than human would not have accomplished our salvation, would not have been "*for us.*"

It is true enough that the Creed once inoculated believers against heresy, and it may do so still. But the more basic issue at stake in the Creed is human salvation and Christian identity. Who is God? Who are we? Does God care about us? How does God act in our lives? How, in God's grace, shall we live together? The Creed tells the story of God and ourselves, the story of our redemption and new life.

The task of orthodoxy today is not to defend itself, to protect its integrity, or to fend off barbarians who clamor at the gate, much less to retreat into an enclave of imagined purity. The task of right belief, embedded in right worship, is to proclaim the good news that it is all "for our sake," "for us and our salvation." Orthodoxy cannot be confined within a defensive citadel, for it only lives in faithful proclamation to a world in desperate need of what it has to say.

Several years ago, the Lilly Endowment funded the most comprehensive survey ever conducted of American congregations and their pastoral leaders. The survey revealed that most pastors find their vocation to be genuinely satisfying. But the survey dug deeper, asking pastors to identify the aspects of their vocation that were most and least satisfying. Astonishingly, the least satisfying, voiced by a large majority, was "difficulty reaching people with the gospel today." Does the difficulty lie in pastors' capacity to proclaim the gospel or the difficulties posed by American culture? Or does it lie in uncertainty and confusion about the shape of the gospel itself? Probably all of the above, but I have become convinced that the basic problem is the absence of clarity about the gospel itself.

What does it mean to be saved? And how is salvation accomplished? The deep tradition of the church, expressed in the church's "right belief," has an answer that is not simply a treasure to be preserved, but a proclamation to be made to a culture that does not know what God has done "for our sake." Orthodoxy, right belief, is not restricted to the Nicene Creed, but it is the place to start. In a church that recites the Creed regularly, but pushes it to the side when shaping faith and life, those who wish to "preserve the truth" should articulate the Creed's affirmations cogently and compellingly, calling upon the whole church to engage the affirmations that have sustained the church for two millennia.

The Importance of One and Three

It may be particularly important to engage the Creed's first and third articles. Too often, orthodoxy's champions focus on Christology, assuming that the first article of the Creed expresses generalized axioms, and acting as if the third article has remained as it was left by the Council of Nicaea in 325: a terse "and the Holy Spirit." If it is orthodoxy that is at stake, it is the *whole* of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that is at stake.

It is usually assumed that we all know what we mean when we utter the word "God." Even in the church, we seem to operate in the naïve belief that our talk about "God" is intended and heard in the same way by all. The proponents of "inclusive language" suppose that reference to God using the masculine pronouns *he* and *his* can easily be replaced by *God* and *God's* because the meaning is self-evident. However, sociologists tell us what we should know already: "God" is a word that can be filled with some pretty bizarre meanings.

Feuerbach understood religious references to *God* as disclosing that "theology is anthropology." He asserted that *God* "expresses nothing other than the essence of man; man's God is nothing other than the deified essence of man."⁴ Feuerbach was half right, for much of popular religiosity is just that—our projection of our desires onto "god." The god of human projection is found in both conservative and liberal forms, often expressed as, "I can't believe in a god who would . . ." Baylor University's 2008 Survey of Religion summarized the four gods Americans believe in—the Authoritative God, the Benevolent God, the Critical God, and the Distant God.⁵ The National Study of Youth and Religion characterizes the beliefs of American youth (and the churches that teach them) as "therapeutic moralistic deism."⁶ None of this is a new phenomenon. Calvin called human nature "a perpetual factory of idols."⁷ Our constant temptation is the effortless creation of "god" in our image.

Karl Barth recognized the power of Feuerbach's critique. Our knowledge of God, he wrote, "could so easily be an empty movement of thought—that is to say, if, in the movement which [we] regard as the knowledge of God, [we] are really alone and not occupied with God at all but only with [ourselves], absolutizing [our] own nature and being, projecting it into the infinite, setting up a reflection of [our] own glory. Carried through in this way, the movement of thought is empty because it is without object. It is a mere game. . . . We are not dealing with God, but at bottom with ourselves."⁸ The Creed guards us against an "empty movement of thought" by drawing us to Scripture's naming and narrating the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, the one God who creates redeems and sustains, the Father Son and Holy Spirit.

The church does not confess a generic deity who is merely the presupposition behind Jesus of Nazareth. The church confesses faith in the one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen; in the one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God; in the one Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. This one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, is not our projection of what we want a god to be, for this God is beyond our imaginings. The Creed encapsulates Scripture's witness to what we could not otherwise know. In the midst of the culture's (and the church's) loose talk about "god," the right belief of the Creed can be proclaimed as the good news of the God who is not our creation.

It may be that "right belief's" faithful proclamation of the only God requires renewed attention to the Creed's third article. The explicit issue in the Arian controversy leading to Nicaea was the relationship of the Son to the Father. Although the oneness of the Son and the Father was established at the Council, there was no affirmation of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Creed of 325 concluded with the mere, "... and the Holy Spirit." It was inevitable that the Arian controversy would provoke a parallel debate about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. "The Arian heresy "speaks against the Word of God," wrote Athanasius, "and as a logical consequence profanes His Holy Spirit."⁹ If the Son is a subordinate, created being as the Arians asserted, surely the Spirit is as well.

In the decades following Nicaea, the Arians attacked the Spirit's divinity, earning for themselves the epithet *pneumatomachoi*—"fighters against the Spirit." Basil the Great voiced the seriousness of the matter before the church: "All the weapons of war have been prepared against us; every intellectual missile is aimed at us. . . . But we will never surrender the truth; we will not betray the defense like cowards. The Lord has delivered to us a necessary and saving dogma: the Holy Spirit is to be

ranked with the Father. Our opponents do not agree; instead they divide and tear away the Spirit from the Father, transforming His nature to that of a ministering spirit."¹⁰

In too many of our churches the Holy Spirit is reduced to a mere "ministering spirit," a vague spiritual presence that is useful in community building, or in justifying decisions of church councils, or in developing personal human spirituality. The Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of God, and so one with the Father and the Son, and so a central character in the narrated drama of God with us and for us. Constantinople did not address the issue of the Holy Spirit by using the technical terms of the second article, *ousias* and *homoousias*, but instead completed Nicaea by employing the biblical, narrative language of the church's developed baptismal instruction, the *regula fidei*.

And so the church confessed, and is called to confess anew, faith in the Holy Spirit . . .

". . . *the Lord, the giver of life.*" The Holy Spirit is one with the *Lord* Jesus Christ and with the *Maker* of all that is. This identification of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Son and the Father is not the product of an abstract theological calculus, but a reflection of the whole range of biblical testimony. The narrative of God's Way encompasses the narrative of the Holy Spirit, from the waters of creation to the heavenly invitation of Revelation. The Holy Spirit is not a surd that fills our own longings or justifies our own preferences, but the very presence of God poured out on all flesh, abiding with us and in us, leading us into the truth about God, about ourselves, and about God's new Way in the world.

". . . *who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.*" Basil said, "I reckon that this 'glorifying' [of the Holy Spirit] is nothing else but the recounting of His own wonders. To describe His wonders gives Him the fullest glorification possible."¹¹ The church worships the Holy Spirit as it testifies to the Spirit's gifts in its midst: prophesy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, diligence, cheerfulness (Rom. 12); wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesy, discernment, tongues and interpretation, assistance, leadership, and love (1 Cor. 12); apostolicity, prophesy, evangelism, tending and teaching (Eph. 4). The church fails to worship and glorify the Spirit when it claims all of these as its own capabilities and achievements.

". . . *who has spoken through the prophets.*" Just as the Holy Spirit is not separable from the Father and the Son, so the Holy Spirit is not set apart from the testimony of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has "spoken

through the prophets” and continues to speak to us through the witness of prophets and apostles. Scripture is not the church’s possession to be mastered, but the “eyeglasses” that enable us to see clearly God’s Way among us.¹²

“. . . *one holy catholic and apostolic church.*” Just as the Holy Spirit is not separable from the Father and the Son nor set apart from Scripture, so the Holy Spirit is not detached from the church. The one holy catholic and apostolic church is not the product of human striving or an accomplishment of human faithfulness. It is the Holy Spirit who creates and sustains and reforms a communion that lives in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God.

“. . . *one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*” Just as the Holy Spirit is not separable from the Father and the Son nor set apart from Scripture, nor detached from the church, so the Holy Spirit is not aloof from our deepest experience. Our forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation, redemption, sanctification—our salvation—is sealed in our lives through the Spirit, who unites us to Christ. The Holy Spirit remains God with us and for us as we live out our baptisms by forgiving as we have been forgiven.

“. . . *the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.*” Finally, the Holy Spirit is not remote from our fears and hopes for ourselves and for the whole creation. The resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come are the sure and certain work of the Holy Spirit. We do not have to rely on technique or technology, on capability or power, for God’s Holy Spirit nourishes hope “*that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay*” (Rom. 8:21).

The church worships and glorifies the Holy Spirit as it recounts to itself, and to the world, the wonders of the Holy Spirit within the church and throughout creation. Christological orthodoxy is not theological orthodoxy unless it is pneumatological orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy is not an ecclesial party within a fractured, contentious church, but rather the wholeness of Christian faith that must be engaged by the whole church. Neither is orthodoxy an all-encompassing system, exalting every conviction to the status of “right belief,” but rather the sphere within which we are to carry out our theological work. Simply put, orthodoxy is the proclamation of the truth of the gospel. Perhaps, then, the last words should come from a Reformed theologian of some note, Karl Barth: “The language about God to be found in the Church is meant to be proclamation, so far as it is directed toward man in the form of preaching and sacrament, with the claim and in an atmosphere of expectation that in accordance with its

commission it has to tell him the Word of God to be heard in faith.”¹³ May it be so.

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¹ John Updike, *A Month of Sundays* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 22.

² Tertullian, “Prescription Against Heretics” in *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S.L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) §13, 39f.

³ Colin Gunton, *Intellect and Action: Elucidations on Christian Theology and the Life of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 1.

⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, Harper & Row, 1967) Third Lecture, 17.

⁵ Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1.11.8., 108.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II/1 The Doctrine of God*, trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957) §26, 71.

⁹ Athanasius, “Letter to Maximus” (c. 371), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Phillip Schaff & Henry Wace (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1892/1994) 567.

¹⁰ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1977), 10.25, 45f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.54, 86.

¹² Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.1., p. 70 and 1.14.1., 160f.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936) §3, 51.

Martin Luther: A Moment to Remember

by Richard Gibbons

Recently I received an email along with a photo of a cute puppy. It read: “This is Buddy. I bought him as a surprise for my husband, but it turns out he’s allergic to dogs. So unfortunately I have to find a new home for him, and am wondering if anyone out there can help. His name is Allen. He’s 61, great at DIY projects, drives a nice car, and plans wonderful holidays.”

I liked this email because I found myself drawn into the predicament and was then delightfully surprised at the end. Similarly, when my life was first impacted by the Gospel in the early 1980s, it came as a life-transforming surprise that I had not seen coming.

Raised in a devout Catholic home in my native Scotland, I attended mass each Sunday morning and devotions each Sunday evening, served as an altar boy for several years, and attended Catholic primary and secondary school. At one point in my early teenage years, I considered going into the priesthood. I never dreamed that 40 years later I would preach at the Augustinerkloster in Erfurt, Germany, where Martin Luther had taken his vows as a monk and lived in the cloisters from 1505 to 1511.

My initial introduction to Martin Luther (1483–1546) was through Roland H. Bainton’s seminal work, *Here I Stand*. Within its pages I discovered that I had a great deal more in common with Luther than I had imagined.

As I lay awake at night reading I immersed myself in the life of Luther. It was not easy to separate the vast panoply of characters—cardinals and kings, peasants and priests, merchants and monks—while empathizing with those caught up in the rigors of monastic life, the liturgical straightjacket of the medieval mass, the sacerdotal practice of the clergy, the trafficking of indulgences, and the life-transforming truth contained within the doctrines of justification by faith and the imputed righteousness of Christ.

In later years I would come to appreciate the magisterial reformers’ emphasis on *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*. But in those early days I felt as though I was walking alongside Luther while he discovered the heart of the gospel contained in the truth, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Over the last 38 years, I have thought about Luther many times; visited his birthplace at Eisleben, the cathedral in Erfurt where he conducted his first mass, and Wartburg castle where the disguised outlaw Junker Jorg would translate the New Testament into German; and spent a fascinating afternoon exploring his home in Wittenberg. Yet despite my historical fascination with Luther, the question uppermost in my mind is this: How does Luther’s influence inform and impact my ministry today?

Like most pastors, I spend time on a variety of issues: intermediate and long-term planning, budgetary issues, staffing quotas, leadership development for elders and deacons, pre- and post-marital counseling, hospital and hospice visitation, encouraging a thriving youth and children’s ministry, preparing and conducting funerals and weddings, and maintaining a radio and television presence—not to mention planning and preaching in three Sunday morning services. Yet without a focus on the centrality of justification by faith, all of the above activity would count for naught.

At the heart of Luther’s dilemma in the years leading up to the publication of his 95 Theses was the instrumental cause contained within the forensic nature of justification: How does a person become justified in the sight of God? Can an individual be certain of a relationship with Christ so that he can “glorify God and enjoy Him forever”?

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of such questions when they were raised by Luther in medieval Europe. Likewise, the importance of “justification by faith alone” continues to be of crucial importance today.

And as in Luther’s day, good theology inevitably makes its way into good hymnology, immersing congregations in reformation theology when they sing:

In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied;
For every sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live.

Getty/Townend 2002

Yet to trust in “Christ alone” as a direct result of the grace of God is only part of the picture. Grappling with a mature understanding of our union with Christ reminds us that we are also the recipients of the imputed righteousness of Christ, and underlines the centrality of the love of God at the heart of the atoning death of Christ, when “*God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Luther again highlighted the nature of justification when he reminded his readers in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) that man is by nature sinful, and that we are lost (Lk. 19:10) and blind (Matt. 23:26) and dead in sin (Eph. 2:1), entirely incapable of contributing to our salvation. Luther emphasized that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8–9).

The primacy of this biblical truth directly impacted my approach to teaching through the book of Romans recently. I repeatedly emphasized that we consistently underestimate the power, significance, and gravitas of sin while consistently underestimating the power,

significance, and gravitas of the transforming love of God. The scriptures are clear. Sin by its nature is enticing, deceptive, addictive, intoxicating, and tranquilizing. Only the emancipating, transforming power of the gospel can free the soul of the influence of sin, initiate spiritual life, and unite us with Christ.

It has been a long time since I first encountered Martin Luther. Yet in ministering to a generation addicted to Facebook, Twitter, and Google that searches for connectivity and intimacy through anonymity, my responsibility is to lovingly and graciously remind them that they are loved by a God who operates at levels of intimacy and connectivity that are eternal. Such love is far greater than they could ever imagine possible. I then trust the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit to apply the gospel and enable it to come as a life-transforming surprise to those who hear.

“Here I stand.” I can do no other!

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A House Divided: What Presbyterians Might Learn From Jacob and Esau

By D. Matthew Stith

That the Presbyterian family in America is a house divided is neither a new phenomenon nor a particularly original observation. For reasons that have seemed good (or at least sufficient) to us, we find ourselves broken into what are functionally separate clans, with all of the characteristically “clannish” behavior that one would expect in such a situation.

Whether we are PC(USA), EPC, ECO, PCA, OPC, or whatever else, it seems that we are increasingly apt to locate our ministries, our conversations, and even our confessional and theological identities strictly within the bounds of our chosen clan, mistrusting and avoiding those “outsiders,” along with their agencies, their officials, their seminaries, and their clearly inadequate understandings of how the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions ought to be embodied in our contemporary context.

This hardening of the boundaries (perhaps “ecclesial sclerosis”?) has been brought on, in many cases, by a

perfectly understandable desire to preserve the integrity of the church’s teaching and theology, to protect church members and congregations who have suffered trauma in the “denominational wars,” or consciously to step away from an increasingly unpleasant and far-ranging conflict that is, to say the least, unseemly in a body purporting to serve the Prince of Peace. It has, however, not come without costs.

I claim no special expertise in ecclesiology, and will leave analysis of the consequences in the larger sphere to others, but on a strictly personal level, this increasingly strict segregation between the various “split P’s” has resulted in the rupture of valued friendships and ministry connections and the cutting off of what were once vibrant channels of conversation and communication with those who understood our shared heritage differently than I. I do not believe these experiences to be unique or even unusual, and I also do not believe that such consequences need be accepted as “just part of the cost of doing business.” I am, in fact,

convinced that God has something better in mind for his Presbyterian children.

Why am I confident of this? Because in Scripture, to which our Reformed instincts impel us to turn for insight, it is made abundantly clear that this is not the first time God has dealt with family divisions among his people! To consider one example, in the stories of Jacob and Esau we find a number of similarities to the dynamics of the present situation of American Presbyterianism, and I suggest that a closer look at that story and particularly at the way it is resolved may offer some insight as to how we might faithfully navigate our own circumstances.

We need not tarry, I think, over the very interesting and legitimate questions of tradition history and textual transmission that dominate much scholarly discussion of the Jacob and Esau stories. Whatever else these texts may be, and however they may have come into their present form, there can be no doubt that they, along with the other stories of the patriarchs and their families, intend to express and explore aspects of the human condition and specifically of human life lived under the covenant auspices of the God of Israel that are timeless and, at least within that covenant context, universal. In other words, the account of the goings-on in Isaac's household can certainly speak to and illuminate similar scenarios in other historical and cultural settings. Thus, the first order of business is to demonstrate that our own situation is indeed similar to that of the sons of Isaac.

I would first point out that Jacob and Esau, who as twin brothers shared a common heritage and background. Nonetheless, they ended up divided for some very compelling reasons. This part of the story is well-known, and so it should suffice to call to the reader's mind that despite their family bond, Jacob and Esau grew up to have very different temperaments and habits (Gen. 25:27). They were each the favorite of one parent (25:28), and even though the settled custom of primogeniture favored Esau as the elder twin in matters of inheritance and legal priority, Rebekah's tumultuous pregnancy and the divine oracle delivered to her before the birth of her sons (25:22–23) suggested from the first that the brothers' relationship would be a conflicted one.

Moreover, by the time they finally separate, after the episodes of Jacob's "purchase" of Esau's birthright and the deceptive acquisition of Isaac's patriarchal blessing, each had what doubtless seemed like good reason to consider himself (a) the rightful heir of Isaac and therefore of the covenant promises first given to Abraham, and (b) the aggrieved party in the dispute. Jacob could claim that Esau had valued this heritage

less than a bowl of soup, and that his brother's murderous intentions toward him were unjustified and even impious, while Esau could claim that he was the victim of fraud and sharp dealing at the hands of Jacob and Rebekah, and that his brother's hoodwinking of Isaac rendered any blessing or status gained thereby illegitimate. On the other hand, each would also have been aware of his own less laudable actions in the matter, and so would have had room for doubt as well. All in all, Rebekah's machinations to send Jacob far away, effecting a division in the house of Isaac, were doubtless the best available course of action under the circumstances, as the alternative was almost assuredly violent fratricide.

I am not suggesting that the story of Isaac's sons serves as an allegory for the current travails of the Presbyterian family. It will not profit us to seek a perfect, one-to-one correspondence between the people and events of the story and our own recent history. Indeed, just as both Esau and Jacob could make a case for his own rightful inheritance of the mantle of Isaac, so also each of our sundered ecclesial clans could certainly convince themselves, if no one else, that they stood in the God-favored and ultimately vindicated role of Jacob, while "those others" were, at best, confused Esaus. Such a course will do nothing to illuminate or alleviate the tensions of the moment, nor will such a heavy-handed approach to the text stand up to careful reading.

It is, however, striking to observe the echoes between the two stories. We, to extend the familial metaphor, also dispute over a heritage that once was held in common throughout our extended family. We also believe—all of us—that we are the closest to holding this heritage rightfully and truly, and that the others have, in some important way or another, either misunderstood or inappropriately valued some aspects of it. Finally and sadly, we also have experienced growing recrimination, opposition, and even outright conflict within the household, to the point that separation has seemed to many to be the best available course of action under the circumstances.

Indeed, as the late flood of realigning congregations and individual church members begins to slow, it may well seem that we are entering an extended time in which each clan is called to pursue its own course and experience its own story. It may even be the case that, like Jacob in Haran, or presumably Esau back in Canaan, our endeavors apart will be blessed by God, and attended by success and increase. But I am convinced that, just as with Esau and Jacob, the story will not end with that separation.

It may have seemed so to the brothers as the next twenty years went by, with Jacob engaging in his long battle of wits with Laban up in Haran while Esau, offstage as far as Genesis is concerned, prospered back in Canaan to the point that he chose to establish his own household in neighboring Seir, rather than remaining in the tents of Isaac. But God would have it otherwise, and his dream-borne instructions to Jacob left no room for misunderstanding or delay: *“Leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth”* (31:3).

They may have been content to separate, but God ultimately forced them back together, strongly suggesting divine dissatisfaction with the ongoing schism. After a messy disentanglement from Laban, Jacob found himself, along with a significant establishment of wives, children, flocks, and herds for which he was now responsible, approaching the country of the brother from whom he had fled in fear of his life. It is not surprising that he would show some misgivings about the impending family reunion. His deployment of his household in widely separated groups is intended to mitigate the disaster if Esau chooses to meet him with violence. His prayer for God’s protection explicitly cites the same concern. Perhaps most telling is his sending forth of a costly bribe in hopes of mollifying Esau before they meet. Given the circumstances of parting, we might well expect this sort of behavior from Jacob, and Esau’s response to Jacob’s initial messengers—mustering 400 men and riding out to meet him—leaves open the possibility of renewed conflict, to say the least. There is great potential for catastrophe and ruin as Jacob’s and Esau’s companies finally meet.

But, as the narrative has been at pains to point out, these events are not, in the final analysis, being driven by the brothers’ preexisting rancor, by Jacob’s politic gestures, or by Esau’s show of strength. This is the Lord’s show. His direct commands to Jacob to return to Canaan are followed up by the appearance of an angelic escort at Mahanaim (32:1–2), Jacob’s reminder of God’s promise to do him good (32:9), and most impressively in the nighttime theophany at the Jabbok (32:24–32), in which Jacob receives a divine blessing in the midst of his preparations to meet his brother. Taking all of the evidence together, there can be no question that Jacob’s reunion with Esau is part of the divine plan. Thus, the somewhat surprising outcome of their meeting can also be taken as congruent with God’s will.

This being the case, there are a few aspects of this encounter and its aftermath that are, for our purposes, worthy of specific note. First, the meeting between Jacob and Esau after years of separation ultimately

comes down not to a negotiation between two powerful clan chiefs but rather to the reestablishment of a personal relationship between brothers. Their tearful embrace precedes and shapes all of the conversation and practical discussion that follow. Second, each brother approaches the other not from a perspective defined by past grievances, but rather from one shaped by their recognition of how God has blessed them in the time of their separation and by a consequent spirit of generosity and goodwill. Third, the reconciliation that takes place between Jacob and Esau does not result in the elimination of all differences between the two, nor in the merger of their respective households into “one big happy family.” Esau’s polite invitation to come and live with him in Seir is met by Jacob’s equally polite deferral to some undefined future date that neither man seriously expects to come. Jacob immediately establishes more or less permanent dwellings first at Succoth and then near Shechem, while Esau returns with all his host to his own stomping grounds.

Finally, while the family remains divided into distinct units, the brothers are now able to live peaceably with one another and to come together for matters of mutual concern and responsibility, specifically their joint exercise of the important filial obligation to properly bury Isaac upon his death (35:29). Indeed, the impact of this reestablished kinship between Jacob and Esau is felt for generations, as witnessed by the Lord’s explicit instructions to the Israelites that they must at all costs avoid conflict with the Edomites, understood to be the descendants of Esau, during their travels in the wilderness (Deut. 2).

My fundamental contention is that the God who was not satisfied with a permanent and rancorous estrangement between Jacob’s and Esau’s branches of the covenant family is unlikely, to say the least, to be pleased with the current state of our Presbyterian churches. While the reasons for the current separations are, as noted above, felt by many to be good and sufficient, this does not mean that they must necessarily be or ought to be permanent, and the story of Isaac’s sons suggests strongly that a God-driven reconciliation may well come to our family as well. What is more, the story also offers some important hints as to the nature of such a restoration of ties and to the character of our own participation in it. To wit:

A restoration, if it happens, will happen by God’s design and on God’s timetable, not according to human strategizing and maneuvering. Had it been up to Jacob and Esau, it is hard to imagine that the house of Isaac would ever have reconciled, but the clear call of God set the ball rolling. It is, therefore, incumbent on all the members of the Presbyterian dispersion to be actively

listening for the Lord's prompting in our situation. When it comes, such prompting must be answered as Jacob did: with alacrity, obedience, planning, and prayer.

Any reconciliation between denominational bodies must begin with and be based upon the restoration and maintenance of individual personal friendships and cooperation between members of the various bodies. Like Esau and Jacob, we as individual Christian brothers and sisters must first look at one another face to face, recognize the other as, in the end, family, and embrace. Only having done so on a personal level can we hope faithfully to engage in dialogue and ministry together on a larger scale.

Jacob's and Esau's reunion involved considerable sacrifice on the part of both brothers. Jacob's princely gift of livestock was, if anything, less challenging for him to give up than were the long-held grievances held by both parties to the separation. If we seek a similar result, we must also be prepared to sacrifice the grievance and righteous indignation that threaten to become cherished possessions for many of us in the aftermath of our experiences of denominational dislocation. This sacrifice must also entail recognition of and repentance for our own possible culpability for past injuries suffered by our sisters and brothers.

Our family history, much like church history in general, demonstrates that we have not succeeded in living into Jesus's will for his Church as expressed in John 17, which is to say complete and visible unity. Though such unity remains God's will and thus will be accomplished eventually, it is possible that, as was the

case for Jacob and Esau, reconciliation in the Presbyterian family may not include complete institutional reunion in our time. Indeed, we may well continue to disagree until the Kingdom comes on precisely how to embody the visible church, as our knowledge and understanding are necessarily imperfect and provisional. For the time being, under the providence of God, it would represent a considerable step forward were we to acknowledge and embrace our kinship, seek truly to retire our grievances and recriminations, and cooperate on matters of mutual priority in service to the Kingdom. It was no small matter that Jacob and Esau joined together to perform one of the most solemn and important tasks of their generation in seeing to Isaac's burial, and if we fractured and fragmented Presbyterians could be brought to similarly cooperate in the most urgent and foundational ministry needs of our time, it would be a mighty and welcome work of God, whether it happens under one ecclesial banner or many.

Our Lord Jesus's declaration that a house divided against itself cannot stand was hardly breaking news. Trusting in the God of Jacob and Esau, the God whose will for reconciliation proved stronger than all the forces that led Isaac's house to divide, let us pray and prepare for a day when our Presbyterian family will once more stand, if not as one then at least not against one another, the better to share our gospel heritage with a world that desperately needs it.

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Calvin and Barth on the Unity of the Church

The unity of the church concerned John Calvin so much that he wrote to Thomas Cranmer on April 1552: "The members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding. So much does this concern me, that, could I be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas, if need were, on account of it" (*Letters* 2:348).

Calvin took both the invisible and visible unity of the church seriously. He insisted: "The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments" (*Institutes* IV.1.10). Calvin acknowledged: "Some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from

communion with the church. For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all... . Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which do not break the unity of faith. ... Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians?" (IV.1.12).

Calvin warned: "We must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissension" (IV.1.12). Yet he was also wary of false forms of unity or "the false pretense of harmony. Peace is a sounding and imposing term, and whenever the Papists meet with it in Scripture

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they eagerly seize upon it for the purpose of raising dislike against us, as if we ... were the authors of division. ... Accursed then be the peace and unity by which men agree among themselves apart from God" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 22).

To Calvin, both faithlessness and disunity were evil. And, according to John Leith, "for Calvin faithlessness is a greater sin than disunity" (Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, 54). Nevertheless, Calvin's commitment to unity is clear: "Let the following two points, then, stand firm. First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons" (IV.1.19).

Likewise, in our own day, Karl Barth called Christians to unity. However, he insisted that the unity of the church is not an *ideal* we may strive to create. Rather it is already a *reality* because of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done. Thus, it is a reality we may discover only in obedience to Him, in Him, and through Him. Moreover, like Calvin, Barth was wary of false forms of unity: "The quest for unity of the Church must not be a quest for Church-unity in itself; for as such it is idle and empty. On the road to such a 'Church-unity in itself' we shall find that both the powers of sin and the powers of grace are against us, and against us irresistibly."

Barth continued: "The quest for the unity of the Church must in fact be identical with the quest for Jesus Christ as the concrete Head and Lord of the Church. The blessing of unity cannot be separated from Him who

blesse, for in Him it has its source and reality, through His Word and Spirit it is revealed to us, and only in faith in Him can it become a reality among us. I repeat: Jesus Christ as the one Mediator between God and man *is* the oneness of the Church, is that unity within which there may be a multiplicity of communities, of gifts, of persons within one Church, while through it a multiplicity of Churches are excluded. When we confess and assert that it belongs to the Church's commission to be one Church, we must not have in mind the idea of unity, whatever its goodness and moral beauty may be—we must have Him in our mind. ... 'Homesickness for the *una sancta*' is genuine and legitimate only in so far as it is a disquietude at the fact that we have lost and forgotten Christ, and with Him have lost the unity of the Church."

"Thus we must be on our guard, all along the line, lest the motives which stir us today lead us to a quest which looks past Him. Indeed, however rightful and urgent those motives are, we could well leave them out of our reckoning. We shall do well to realize that in themselves they are well-meaning but merely human desires, and that we can have no final certainty that they are rightful, no unanswerable claim for their fulfillment. Unless we regard them with a measure of holy indifference we are ill-placed for a quest after the unity of the Church. But we cannot leave out of our reckoning the claim urged by Jesus Christ upon us. If we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, then the question of the unity of the Church will most surely become for us a burning question. Then, it may be, His voice will endorse those motives of which we have spoken, with weight, necessity and imperative force; it will then be right and requisite that they should kindle us to a flame, and any indifference to them will be far from holy. From that Voice which alone can question us in tones which make 'our hearts burn within us' must we expect and await the ultimate answer" Karl Barth, *The Church and The Churches*, 18–21.

Richard Burnett, Managing Editor

