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Cooking Up Gotterdamerung: Radical Feminist Worship Substitutes Self for God

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“FEMINISTS ARE COOKING UP GOTTERDAMERUNG. The feminist movement in Western culture is engaged in the slow execution of Christ and Yahweh . . . God is going to change . . . We women are going to bring an end to God . . . We will change the world so much that He won’t fit in anymore.”¹

Thus opens Naomi Goldenberg’s *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. In this bold manifesto, published in 1979, Goldenberg expresses the mood and views of many radical spiritual feminists,² eco-feminists and liberationists. She charges that men created the God of Christianity in the image of a male authority figure, an omnipotent lawgiver and judge. This figure of fantasy, she avers, has legitimated patriarchal domination; generated scorn for the female body and

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supported the assertion that women are not made in the image of God and are thus inferior.

“Jesus,” she insists, “cannot symbolize the liberation of women [because] a culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as the equals of its men. In order to develop a theology of women’s liberation, feminists have to leave Christ and Bible behind them.”³

Thus today the move is on to create religions that divinize the self. Goldenberg expresses the phenomenon most transparently when she writes, “It is likely that as we watch Christ and Yahweh tumble to the ground, we will completely outgrow the need for an external god.”⁴ In place of “traditional religion,” she offers depth psychology which she identifies as a “living religion . . . that satisfies a person’s need for mythic reflection and understanding.”⁵ What she is proffering is the self-religion of archetypal mix and match. It goes by many names.

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When the self has not been fed, it looks for that which will fill. It focuses on its own needs and grasps at anything that might appear to have the potential to satisfy the vacuum. So here we find the call to go within and bake a new "bread of life." Here we find a Liberator Christ regarded as just one among a host of archetypal symbols. Here we find a call for humankind to create the new humanity.⁶

How tragic that so many are failing to see that the only all-satisfying answer to the deepest of human hungers is not feeding on oneself but rather turning to the one true Bread of Life. How tragic that so many miss the reality of liberation available only through the real (not symbolic) Jesus Christ. How tragically misguided is the effort to engineer a new order of humankind minus the Living Redeemer. Only in Him and through Him can there be a New Creation (2 Cor. 5:17). How tragic that worship, in the wake of all of this, has become the idolatry of self-absorption and navel-gazing when it is meant to be, as C. Welton Gaddy has explained, "a gift between lovers who keep on giving to each other."⁷

Our purpose, in these pages, is to review how radical spiritual feminist practices diverge from Bible-honoring worship, ritual and prayer. We begin by defining our terms and examining the foundational dissimilarities between the two theological systems.

Biblical Worship of the Triune God

Worship has been defined as "the offering of devotion, praise, and adoration to that which is deemed worthy of such offering, usually God. Worship of that which is less than God as though it is equivalent to God, especially if it is addressed to particular images, is idolatry."⁸

"To worship God is to ascribe to him the worth of which he is worthy. The church of Jesus Christ is by definition a worshipping community called into being by God to be a 'spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 3:5)."⁹ Worship involves "a diversity of activities such as praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, intercession . . . petition" and service.¹⁰

Biblical worship is commanded and involves recognition of God's holiness (1 Ch.16:29). It is a humbling experience; a drawing near; an offering of ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Ps. 95:6; Heb. 10:1; Romans 12:1). Worship is to be given only to God and it is to be offered in spirit and in truth (Mt. 4:10; Jn. 4:24). In worship we remember and honor the One who created the heavens, the earth, the seas and the springs of water (Rev. 14:7). Worship is not to be directed to human beings nor to other gods nor to anything in heaven or on the earth or in the waters (Exodus 19:3,4; Rev. 22:9).

Those who worship, "hear the Word proclaimed, receive the Word enacted in Sacrament, discover the Word in the world, and are sent to follow the Word into the world."¹¹

Robert Webber, one of the foremost scholars in worship renewal explains, "Worship represents Jesus Christ through re-presentation. Worship tells and acts out the living, dying, and rising of Christ. Worship celebrates Christ's victory over evil, the certain doom of Satan, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth . . . worship celebrates God's saving deed in Jesus Christ."¹²

If "worship is the church celebrating the Gospel,"¹³ ritual is the visual re-enactment of the Gospel. Rituals point beyond themselves to God's saving work even as the Holy Spirit realizes that work in worshiper's lives. Therefore, "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men. . ."¹⁴

The ritual of marriage, for example, is instituted by God and announces in word and deed that God has joined together into one, two lives. Similarly, in baptism, the outward washing affirms what God has done inwardly to produce new birth in Christ. Baptism is "a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself; of remission of sins by his blood and regeneration by His Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life. . ."¹⁵

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, instituted by Christ, visibly proclaims the sacrifice of Jesus and is a sign and seal of those benefits in a believer's life.¹⁶

Prayer, then, is our response to the saving work of the Lord. It is only as a result of Christ's death that we can approach God in prayer. Prayer, within this context, has been defined as "the relating of the self or soul to God in trust, penitence, praise, petition, and purpose, either individually or corporately. . .[For Christians, prayer has traditionally been] the acknowledgment of God as the source of all goodness and therefore the One who can meet human need and longing."¹⁷

"In biblical religion, prayer is understood as both a gift and a task . . . It entails revealing our innermost desires to God but also God's revelation of his desires to us (cf. Prov. 1:23) . . . The goal of prayer is not absorption into the being of God but the transformation of the world for the glory of God. We yearn for the blessed vision of God, but even more we seek to bring our wills and the wills of all people into conformity with the purposes of God. We pray not simply for personal happiness or for protection (as in primitive prayer) but for the advancement and extension of the kingdom of God."¹⁸

Prayer involves wholeheartedness (Jer. 29:13); contrition (2 Ch. 7:14); faith (Mk. 11:24); confession, righteousness (Jas. 5:16) and obedience (1Jn. 3:22). We are commanded to pray and to pray unceasingly (1Ch. 16:11; Mt. 26:41; Lk. 18:1; 1 Th. 5:17). We are aided in prayer by the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us (Ro. 8:26) and, in prayer, we call on the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26). We are assured that our prayers are precious to God, ascending as incense before Him (Rev. 5:8; 8:3).

Confessional Christianity is founded upon the belief in one God who is both immanent and transcendent, beyond gender, a personal being of a different essence from the created order, existing eternally in three co-equal, co-eternal Persons. This God is revealed in the Bible through a vast array of masculine, feminine, and non-gendered images, attributes and adjectives which include: creator, father, savior, shepherd, spirit, teacher, comforter, counselor, defender, king, a consuming fire, a rock, a shield. The God of the Word is holy, caring, compassionate, forbearing, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, glorified, gentle, faithful, good, gracious, great, living, active, self-existent, eternal, unchanging, just, wise, righteous, loving, perfect.

Biblical Christianity worships the fully-human, fully-divine Jesus Christ and affirms His virgin birth; His ministry; His death on the cross; His bodily resurrection and His ascension into heaven. Believers look forward to His second coming.

Biblical Christianity affirms the personal nature and work of the Holy Spirit thus rejecting any sense of the Spirit as an impersonal or all-encompassing force of God. Biblical Christianity affirms the universal sinfulness of humankind and the provision of salvation only through Jesus Christ. Believers look to the Bible for guidance in living out their faith in gratitude for the Lord's gracious salvation.

And biblical Christianity views the Bible as the inspired Word of God. When approaching it, Bible-believing Christians know they must do their best to remove their lenses of experience, relying upon the Word to speak and breathe. The individual endeavors to read meaning *out* of the Word rather than *into* the Word: exegesis v. eisegesis.

Radical Feminist Worship of Self

Radical feminism views traditional Christianity as patriarchal, dualistic, woman-oppressing, demeaning, guilt-producing, enslaving, non-connective, anti-nature and unconcerned with earthly matters because overly-focused on rewards in the hereafter. For women, like Naomi Goldenberg, the "lamp unto one's feet"¹⁹ is not the Bible but, rather, individual experience and vision. In the radical feminist catalogue of faith, religion is valued only as it coincides with and bolsters an individual's concepts of myth and image.

Thealogy (theology constructed from women's experience)²⁰ tends to speak of God in pantheistic or panentheistic terms, stresses archetypal language and the feminine divine and denies the uniqueness and deity of Jesus Christ. Rejected herein is "substance-dominated theology" (over against relational or process theology), substance dualism and the immutability of God. "Nearly all feminists acknowledge the compatibility between feminist and process views of the world."²¹

Those who embrace pantheism within this system play with the word to suggest that "if it is understood as an affirmation that all reality is God's reality, then it is not an

alternative to Christian theology but an ingredient in it." In this fluid mode, pantheism is employed to suggest that sin is "a violation of the world's well-being, which also necessarily violates God's well-being."²²

This view is really more the province of panentheism. As Marcus Borg explains, panentheism is the belief that "God is more than everything, even as God is present everywhere. God is all around us and within us, and we are within God . . . This source of eternal wisdom is called by the contemporary Jungian scholar E. F. Edinger 'the Self' (with a capital S) and is viewed as the equivalent to God. If we combine this with the notion of God's omnipresence, it leads to a concept of God as that within us, within which we also are."²³

Carter Heyward elucidated this view when she told her audience at the 1998 Re-Imagining Conference that "while nobody, not even Jesus is divine in him or herself, everybody—like Jesus—is able to god. And I use this [to god] as a verb. This is why we are here—to god . . . The good news is that everybody is in God. Nobody is left out." Heyward made it clear that "everybody" includes the Earth and all its creatures.

When the Bible is rejected as divine revelation and God is viewed as a pantheistic oneness, it is a short step to the embracing of Jung's collective unconscious. Then the divine becomes a matter of archetypal models with which one may play mix and match.

Joan Chamberlain Engelsman demonstrates this use of archetypes when she suggests that three feminine models could be rolled into Christian imagery for God: "the mother, the maid, and the anima."²⁴ Or, she says, the feminine image of God might be developed by describing "one member of the trinity as feminine . . . [or developing] the feminine aspect of all three members of the trinity . . . [or by adding] a feminine image of God [to the trinity thus creating] . . . a quaternity."²⁵

Thus, the system begins by rejecting the Bible and positing God as a pantheistic oneness. Then images of God are chosen from a buffet of archetypal models (whatever resonates with one's own mythic ideals).

Radical feminism then sets to work criticizing and dismantling sacrificial theology—denying the virgin birth, the efficacy of the cross and personal salvation through faith in the living Jesus Christ. The cross, in fact, is seen as an instrument of torture and as a phallic symbol. The idea that reconciliation with God might be obtained through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is viewed by some as a theory of divine child abuse (the Father sending His innocent Son to His death to satisfy His wrath).²⁶ The cross is stripped entirely of redemptive value and seen only as a tool for the sanctioning of violence and victimhood.

Radical feminism then dismisses the reality of personal sin, focusing instead on systemic sin (akin to other liberation theologies). Jesus' life is looked to as being representative of the saving power of God through solidarity with the marginalized. "Salvation," in this

system, is said to be achieved through compassionate love in community and syncretism is embraced when it is seen to be an aid in one's liberation.²⁷ The Fall in the Garden of Eden is viewed as an anti-woman myth and eschatology is revisioned as a matter of future global solidarity achieved through the rise of Christa community—a community of redemptive and erotically loving (creatively powerful) people.

With this theological foundation, religious observances, then focus on women's experiences; women's mythology; the feminine divine; the remembrance of women and the celebration of the female body and bodily functions. Observances are conducted in the circle which serves as a symbol of oneness, the all-encompassing godhead, the female entryway and equality.

As these elements form the core of the system, it is not surprising to discover that the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, provides no listing for "worship." There are entries under ritual, liturgy and prayer but the practices are given self-serving casts.

Women's rituals are defined, in Russell and Clarkson, as "agreed-upon patterns of symbolic action that spring from, evoke, and develop complex and often deep layers of feeling and thought."

"As such," writes Linda J. Clark, "they carry the values and intentions of communities. . . They objectify a community's shared, subjective experience. . . Women's rituals often embody certain characteristics: (1) they unite emotion and intellect; (2) they work with the body and images of the natural world; and (3) they take place in circles where hierarchy of leadership is either modified or abolished altogether."²⁸

Fredrica Harris Thompsett notes that sacraments are reworked to reflect "women's diverse experiences, memories, and imagination; advocating women's involvement in shaping their own symbolic universe; overcoming false dualisms of spirit over matter, mind over body, male over female; contextualizing the development of ritual; and depending on mutual and/or rotating responsibility for leadership."²⁹

Marjorie Procter-Smith lists as common elements in feminist liturgy: non-hierarchical and egalitarian leadership and planning; the honoring of women's experiences and "openness to other religions and traditions, texts, myths and symbols;" the honoring of "women's connections with one another and with women of the past;" the valuing of "women's bodies and bodily functions . . . as reflections of the holy and loci of divine revelation;" the affirmation of "the presence of the holy in the everyday and extraordinary experiences of women;" the rejection of "patriarchal dichotomies, affirming the nonhierarchical interconnectedness of all life as a model of the divine life" with these interconnections "understood to include nature;" the questioning of "traditional forms of authority, both human and divine" and the evaluation of "traditional texts, symbols and ritual practices . . . as to their potential for

contributing to the well-being of women and other oppressed people, rather than in reference to some intrinsic authority."³⁰

Gail Lynn Unterberger notes that in this system women, in prayer, use "alternative ways of describing the sacred, from God/She to Goddess, Mother, Parent, Sophia, Shekhinah, Light, Holy One, Bakerwoman God, and countless others. Generally preferred are appellations that are not militaristic, triumphalistic, narcissistic in the holy attributes or domineering or 'juvenilizing' of women. Also important is concern for animals, the biosphere, and the cosmos . . . Many feminists find it helpful to affirm that prayer often changes the one who prays rather than persuades an omniscient God. Feminist process theologians . . . have posited that because of the intricate interactive relationship between God and humanity, both are transformed through prayer."³¹

Thus we have ritual as the objectification of a community's shared experience; sacrament as the reflection of women's experiences; liturgy as the honoring of women's experiences and prayer as co-creation, co-transformation within the pantheistic oneness.

Examples of Radical Feminist Worship

We are seeing the playing out of this system through a variety of media, individuals, churches, educational institutions and communities.

Here is a sampling:

United Methodist Communications (UMCom) produced a 15-hour video series for use in the denomination's Sunday Schools. According to *UMAAction*, a renewal/reform group, the speakers on the tapes question "the authority of the Scriptures, the deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ, divine omnipotence, the expectation of eternal life, the reality of human sin, and God's ability to answer specific prayer." Those interviewed on the tape include radical feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Catherine Keller, Delores Williams, Chung Hyun Kyung and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Chung advocates "the worship of ancient Korean gods and goddesses [and] . . . ancestor worship." Another woman, Valerie Russell, opines that, "Prayer is a time you meditate and get in touch with the seeds of power in you."³²

Retreat centers, like the Presbyterian Church (USA)-owned Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, are hosting retreats centered on the goddess. A flyer, advertising a fall 1998 conference proclaims, "The Anasazi Ancient Mothers are calling YOU to celebrate the sacred feminine Goddess in the Land of Enchantment. . . With art, movement, ritual and song—Honor the Goddess within each woman. Tell YOUR Herstory with art, voice, dance, ritual. Walk a Hopi labyrinth . . . Meditate. Create art with your symbolic Goddess language. . . Dance at the Temple of the Living Goddess. Connect as a sacred circle with very special women for mutual transformation. Share the magic!!!"³³

The book *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* contains sermons, meditations, liturgies, litanies, eucharistic celebrations, Bible studies and rituals all promoting radical feminist principles. It contains, for example, a meditation on the gnostic Gospel of Thomas and a sermon and litany in praise of pantheism which asserts that "God's (or Sophia's or Wisdom's) presence permeates all things and people" including "the Catholic archdiocese of Chicago, the Painted Bridge Arts Center . . . Greyhound bus drivers . . . witches and witch doctors . . . [and] suburban housewives going back to college."³⁴ Herein also, the hymn "Fairest Lord Jesus" is rewritten to honor "Fairest Sophia, Ruler of all nature, O Thou in whom earth and heav'n are one . . ."³⁵

Sophia, the Greek word (feminine gender) for wisdom, is a unifying symbol within radical feminism. The word in Hebrew, *hokmah*, is found throughout the wisdom passages of the Bible (most notably, Proverbs) and also in the apocrypha and in gnostic texts including the Gospel of Thomas. The argument is made that Sophia is a legitimate image of God, not simply a personification of an attribute. As the word is feminine gender, it is used to put a feminine face on God. It has also been used, however, in the attempt to open Christianity to the worship of female deities from Astarte to Isis to Aphrodite and Mary. Some image Sophia as a divine consort or a personified hypostasis of God. Jesus is sometimes equated with Sophia to become Sophia-Jesus or is presented as the prophet of Sophia. But *hokmah/sophia/wisdom* is more properly understood as a personification. This is the most reasonable interpretation in light of its counterpoint with the "foolish woman" of Prov 9:13-18.

In the preface to Miriam Therese Winter's *WomanWord*, the author asserts, "To make ritual is to remember into life and into meaning, to determine who and what will survive from generation to generation, what people will be honored, what values will be strengthened, what traditions are worth keeping, what perspectives will be handed on . . . Ritual not only transmits perspective, it also molds reality according to its worldview. . . When that which is liturgically rehearsed is no longer the way men want the world to be but the way it should and could be, then the whole of humanity, female and male, will know a heartfelt liberation and the world will take one giant step toward realizing the reign of God."³⁶

To advance this agenda, she lifts, among other images, the "Cosmic Christa"³⁷ and, in "A Psalm to the Goddess," offers praise to Ishtar, Inanna, Sophia, Isis, Nut, Gaia, Hera, Athene, Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, Persephone, Anath, Astarte and Asherah.³⁸

Similar books, retreat speakers, ritual guides and videos are making inroads to the church, colleges, women's groups and seminaries. Women's gatherings, especially in the mainline denominations, are evidencing the impact. Coming alongside of these are two movements that are, perhaps, the most aggressive in furthering the radical feminist agenda: Church Women United and the Re-Imagining Community.

Church Women United is an ecumenical organization which is known primarily for its production and distribution of three annual worship service material packets. It has been in existence since 1941 and, for many years, has served as an advocate in peace and justice issues especially as these involve women and children.

A review of the materials CWU has produced in the 1990s, however, reveals "prayers offered to the Universal Mother; calls for the abandonment of fall/redemption theology because it is said to be linked with 'shame, fear and guilt,' and the lauding as 'prophetic voices' and 'sacred storytellers' of those who praise the rebellion of Eve in the Garden of Eden; encourage goddess worship and syncretism; suggest that Christian missions are an imposition and dismiss the biblical concept of an omnipotent God as a 'phallocratic fantasy.'"³⁹

In the 1997 World Day of Prayer materials, participants were called upon to declare—in a responsive reading—that, because of patriarchal abuses, "even in the church women cannot be partners with men."⁴⁰ In song, they asserted that people will become a "new creation" by "meeting each other" and "by meeting with the earth."⁴¹

In the 1997 May Fellowship Day materials, women were called upon to declare—through a responsive reading—that they will be responsible for the "world of the new creation." To be brought to birth in this "church of the new creation," they avowed, is "an unbreakable bond in the Spirit that binds as one all brothers and sisters, transcending. . . religion. . . that treats no personal preference as aberration or handicap. . . Blessed are we when we give birth to the Word made flesh in us."⁴² Through this proclamation, participants denied the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and made startling claims as to the breadth of their own natures.

In a "ritual of remembering" in the 1997 World Community Day materials, participants lifted a chalice of water which was said to hold the "blood and tears of women, named and unnamed, who have suffered and celebrated before us. This is the blood of monthly cycles, life and death, and the tears of pain and joy that anoint our lives." This was accompanied by bread "made with old raisins (symbolizing the dried-up dreams of earlier generations), the amaranth grain grown from ancient seed, and the water of our mother's tears . . . We claim the past, we move into the future full of hopes and dreams for the fruit of the New Creation."⁴³

The amaranth seed was introduced earlier on in the materials as recalling the mystical heart of the Aztec, Mayan and Incan cultures. The writers of this 1997 program suggested that just as the male oppressors—"the Spanish empire-builders"—sought to destroy the mystical seed of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas and just as the male oppressors—European church leaders—sought to destroy the mystical seed of the medieval women mystics (Hildegard of Bingen and others), so male oppressors today will try to destroy the rediscovered mystical (linked with pagan) seed CWU is celebrating.

The Rev. Martha M. Cruz, CWU's Deputy General Director for Administration and Communication has insisted this ritual was not intended to serve in the place of the Eucharist. Rather, she insisted it was all just a matter of using materials that would be familiar to participants.

Worship in the Re-Imagining Community

Radical spiritual feminist principles are seen in their most blatant forms in the rituals and prayers of the Re-Imagining Community.

The movement emerged in 1993 with a controversial conference held to mark the midpoint in the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women. Its aim was to do "theological work born out of women's experience."⁴⁴

More than 2200 participants were present for the event which sparked an uproar in mainline denominations. Much of the commotion concerned the new and questionable liturgies and rituals designed specifically for the conference.

Nearly five years after the excitement of the first conference, the Re-Imagining movement is still making waves. As the now fully-incorporated Re-Imagining Community, it continues to sponsor conferences such as the most recent "Re-Imagining Revival," held in April 1998. The organization also regularly publishes a newsletter, and coordinates—across the country—numerous "faith labs," mini-seminars committed to theological exploration.

The opening ritual at the 1993 conference encouraged attendees to lift up many names for God, to indeed imagine their own names for the Holy One. While traditional and clearly biblical names such as Father God, Elohim, and Spirit were mentioned, re-imaginers overstepped the boundaries of orthodoxy as they called God "divine ancestor," "earth mother," and "yin and yang." One participant, reflecting on this particular ritual, declared, "This [naming] continued until we arrived at the point where—would you believe it?—we wrote our own names as those of God."⁴⁵ To this already expansive list of questionable designations we may now add "Cosmic Mother," "Isis," "Aphrodite," and "Brigid," names suggested by 1998 Re-Imagining Revival presenter Mari Castellanos. One would assume that re-imaginers view each of these "names of the Holy One" as acceptable means of addressing God in prayer and worship.

In another ritual that took place at the 1993 conference, speaker Aruna Gnanadason led participants in coloring red dots on their foreheads. She asserted that in Indian culture wearing the red dot is a symbol of having been in the presence of the divine and "the divine is everywhere."

When missionaries came to India they did not allow Christian converts to continue wearing the red dots on their foreheads claiming that only the cross belonged there. Gnanadason, however, continued to wear the red dot as a

sign of protest against the missionary movement. In the Re-Imagining ritual, participants wore the red dot as a symbol of being conscious of the divine in each other, and they went on to bow to the divine in the other person. In this way they joined Gnanadason in protesting against the missionaries who brought the Gospel message to India.

This ritual is one example of the Re-Imagining movement's emphasis on personal experience and cultural distinctiveness over against the revelation of Scripture. Such an emphasis leads to a denial of absolute and universal truth, and it allows pluralism and relativism to prevail. As one conference observer stated, "The Re-Imagining event presented a smorgasbord of cultural ideas and religions, allowing attendees to pick and choose to their liking."⁴⁶

The "apple ritual," first used at the 1996 Re-Imagining Conference: "Naming, Claiming and Re-Imagining Power" and repeated at the recent "Re-Imagining Revival" is a celebration and affirmation of Eve's act of rebellion against God (Gen. 2).

Claiming that the Christian tradition has used the Fall narrative in a way that is harmful to women, re-imaginers used this ritual to rebel against church teachings, to commit what they perceive to be ecclesial subversion. Leaders distributed apples among participants who were then invited to "honor our mother Eve who was created to know. Let us bite the apple in celebration, for we, like Eve, are created to know." Women defiantly bit into apples as they were encouraged to "reach for wisdom" and "the wholeness of God" in imitation of Eve. And the musical refrain in accompaniment was: "Taste, taste and see, how good is the fruit of Garden." With this ritual re-imaginers claimed the right to "oppos[e] and expos[e] the social and ecclesial patterns of domination and subordination that have been perpetuated in a hierarchical ordering of church structures."⁴⁷

Through this ritual, re-imaginers dismissed the seriousness of sin and snubbed their noses at the biblical God. The denial that personal sin affects one's relationship with God is consistent with the moral relativism seen in Re-Imagining circles, especially in the realm of sexual ethics. The only sin that seems to be recognized as a problem in the eyes of these radical feminists is the corporate sin of patriarchy.

By denying the existence of personal sin, radical feminists remove the need for a savior with the power to reconcile them to God. The next step is to reinterpret Jesus, His incarnation and especially His salvific death. Hence, Revival attendees sang the traditional hymn "It is Well with My Soul," stripped of all references to the blood of Christ, the cross and the second coming. Instead of one's sins being nailed to the cross to be borne no more, sins were said to be managed by being "left in the wake" as individuals are nice to each other in community. No need for Jesus. No need for His atoning sacrifice. Rituals and worship such as these celebrate disobedience to God, ignore the reality of personal sin, and remove the need for a savior.

Something that has become standard in these circles is the Sophia blessing. Re-Imaginers invoke the blessing of the feminine divine on presenters and each other at Re-Imagining gatherings as they stand and sing, “Bless Sophia, dream the vision, share the wisdom dwelling deep within,” while performing simple hand motions. These words address Sophia as a Christian would address the one and only God.

Re-Imaginers further revere Sophia in the milk and honey ritual, the observance that caused the greatest uproar following the 1993 conference. The ritual has been repeated over the years but, in 1998, was not accompanied by the erotic liturgy of the original.

The observance was designed to celebrate women’s sensuality, “how good it is to be in our bodies.”⁴⁸ Some re-imaginers claim that this ritual is not intended to be a substitute for the Eucharist while at the same time, asserting that the cup of milk and honey was a part of the oldest communion texts of the early church given “for the healing of the bitterness of the human heart with the sweetness of Christ’s word.”⁴⁹ Even if the latter claim is accurate, the liturgy written to accompany the Re-Imagining ritual of milk and honey was indisputably not a part of the early Christian tradition.

In the liturgy, Sophia is equated with God, named Creator God, and ascribed a specifically female body. Participants speak of the “milk of our breasts” and “the nectar between our thighs” and link these characteristics with Sophia, noting that these attributes enable them to claim to be made in the image of Sophia. They invoke Sophia to let her own “milk and honey flow.” Presumably this is the same “milk of [her] breasts” and “nectar between [her] thighs” that the women have just affirmed. These words imply that Sophia, as Creator God, created the world in the same way that women “create life” when they birth children. Elsewhere in the liturgy women claim to “invite a lover” and “birth a child” and apparently they envision Sophia doing the same. It is here that God, as Sophia, is transformed into Goddess.

Hilda Keuster, author of the controversial liturgy, says that as a result of this and other rituals she is “beginning to hold a feminine image as [her] primary image of God.” She explains that this was “largely the result of discovering, as I wrote, all the richness in a fully developed, gender-specific image of God as Sophia . . . Seeing what flowed from my pen when Sophia was invoked, described, and praised created an inner shift. Unconsciously and spontaneously, my thoughts and language moved away from a neuter divinity to a feminine God with whom I connected in a very deep, primitive, and natural way.”⁵⁰

The most recent Re-Imagining conference, “Re-Imagining Revival,” repeated the milk and honey ritual, the Sophia blessing and the ecclesial subversion/apple ritual. In addition, participants established even more innovative expressions of worship. The opening ritual, “Lighting the Lamps,” was a celebration of those often neglected or misunderstood women who had come before them on the journey of Re-Imagining. Incorporating music and dance, a

beating drum, light and darkness, and dramatic readings, the scene had the feel of a seance when conference leaders summoned the spirit of “First Woman” and lifted her as an example for all women to follow. Then participants sang, “You are a lamp unto our feet . . . and a light unto our path.” These well-known words (Ps.119:105) were applied to women and women’s stories.

The conference progressed from “Lighting the Lamps” to “Troubling the Waters” as participants mixed together water they had brought from their hometowns, water which was said to be a representation of their “histories, people, joys and sorrows,”⁵¹ water which was said to be symbolic of the interconnectedness of every person. Re-imaginers circulated bowls of this communal water so that participants could “trouble” it, stirring and splashing while offering examples of things that “trouble their own water.” The ritual was used to encourage women to consider the ways they could trouble the waters, that is, stir up trouble, within the church and patriarchal systems, and speakers used Matthew 8 as biblical support for this sort of action.

The final theme of the Revival was that of “Raising the Body.” Claiming that the spirit has long been associated with maleness and thus maleness received affirmation, while the body has been connected with femaleness and thus received rejection, re-imaginers sought to reclaim the body. Participants used spices, again serving as a representation of the whole of their identity and experience, to anoint one another, drawing on the biblical imagery of the women who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body (Mk 16:1). Re-imaginers, however, viewed themselves not as anointing the dead, but as commissioning each other to continue the work of raising the body.

Presenter Anne Patrick, McDeever Chair of Moral Theology at St. John’s University in New York, suggested ways of doing this which included: striving to overcome dualism between the spirit and the body and attending to the earth by recognizing it as the body of God.

By substituting a panentheistic oneness for the Triune God as the focus of its worship, radical feminist spirituality denies every fundamental Christian doctrine. It distorts the identity of the one true God, and rejects the Incarnation and Atonement. It elevates women’s experience over revelation, casting aside the authority of Scripture and pulling from it only that which affirms women’s experience and mythic base. Finally, the Re-Imagining rituals denigrate the person and work of Jesus Christ by denying His deity and scoffing at the cross.

This radical feminist worship has as its focus, self. Nowhere within its system does it ascribe to the Christian God the “worthfulness” He is due.

Barbara Lundblad, Associate Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in NY, amid great applause and cheering, reflected on the worship at the 1993 conference saying, “Some would have called our worship of last night verging on heresy . . . We did not last night name the name of Jesus. Nor have we done anything in the

name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Indeed.

¹ Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 3-4. The reference is to *Die Gotterdammerung* (The Twilight of the Gods), an opera by Richard Wagner. The phrase is used to indicate the turbulent ending of a regime or an institution.

² The “naming” of this theology is under much debate. Some proponents, such as Letty Russell, embrace the label “radical;” others would prefer eco-feminist, process theologian, liberationist or simply, feminist. To distinguish this system from other forms of feminism, we have employed the term, “radical.” We do so in this sense: “radical” is defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary* as “departing markedly from the usual or customary; favoring or effecting fundamental or evolutionary changes in current practices, conditions or institutions.” It is fair to say that this system aligns with these meanings of the word “radical.”

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ Goldenberg, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ Miriam Theresa Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 4.

⁷ C. Welton Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), xi.

⁸ John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 1045.

⁹ R.G. Rayburn, “Worship in the Church,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1193.

¹⁰ Rosemary Goring, ed., *Larousse Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* (New York: Larousse, 1994), 567.

¹¹ Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Order: Directory for Worship*, W-1.1004.

¹² Robert Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Confessions*, “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 6.112.

¹⁵ Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Confessions*, “The Larger Catechism,” 7.275.

¹⁶ Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Confessions*, “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 6.161.

¹⁷ Bowker, 762-763.

¹⁸ D.G. Bloesch, “Prayer,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 867.

¹⁹ Psalm 119:105 reads: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”

²⁰ Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 281. “The word [theology] is used both as a positive alignment with Goddess, goddesses, or God in female terms and as an iconoclastic term to create awareness of the androcentrism of theology.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 296-297. It should be noted here that there are many brands of feminism. Women who claim the label “evangelical feminist” would not concur with this statement on process theology nor would they align themselves with the other aspects of theology discussed in this paper. The evangelical feminist holds a high view of scripture and believes that the Bible affirms the equality of the sexes.

²² *Ibid.*, 169.

²³ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁵ Borg, 32,41.

²⁴ Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 2nd. ed (Wilmette: Chiron, 1995), 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

²⁶ See, for example, Joanne Brown and C.R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989).

²⁷ Chung Hyun Kyung refers to this as “survival-liberation centered syncretism.” See Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 7th ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 113.

²⁸ Linda J. Clark, “Rituals, Women’s,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 251.

²⁹ Fredrica Harris Thompsett, “Sacraments,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 252.

³⁰ Marjorie Procter-Smith, “Liturgy,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 169.

³¹ Gail Lynn Unterberger, “Prayer,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 223.

³² “UM Film Series Undermines Faith,” *UMAction Briefing*, Fall 1997, n.p.

³³ “The Goddess Returns to Ghost Ranch” flyer.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134-136.

³⁵ Susan Cole, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig, *Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 185.

³⁶ Miriam Therese Winter, *WomanWord: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), ix.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

³⁸ Miriam Therese Winter, *WomanWisdom: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 299-301.

³⁹ Donna F.G. Hailson, “Church Women Unorthodox: The Theological Corruption of Church Women United,” *Touchstone*, July/August 1998, 45.

⁴⁰ “Like a Seed Which Grows Into a Tree,” 1997 World Day of Prayer Worship Bulletin, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴² “Growing Seeds in Prepared Soil,” 1997 May Fellowship Day Worship Bulletin, 7-8. Note: the author of this responsive reading is Miriam Therese Winter.

⁴³ “Gathering Seed From A Medieval Motherroot,” 1997 World Community Day Leaders’ Guide, 15-16.

⁴⁴ Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joern, eds. *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), xv.

⁴⁵ Ingeline Nielson, “Naming God,” *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining*, Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joern, eds. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 170.

⁴⁶ Dottie Chase, “United Methodist Women Get Taste of Sophia Worship,” *Good News*, Jan/Feb. 1994, 37.

⁴⁷ Letty Russell, “Re-Imagining The Master’s House,” 1996 Re-Imagining Study Book, 21.

⁴⁸ 1998 Re-Imagining participant’s book, 7.

⁴⁹ Heather Murray Elkins, “The Bitterness of the Human Heart and the Sweetness of the Word,” *Re-Imagining* newsletter, May 1995, 5.

⁵⁰ Hilda A. Keuster, “Creating the Sophia Ritual,” *Re-Membering and Re-Imagining*, Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joern, eds., (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), 18.

⁵¹ 1998 Re-Imagining participant’s book, 11.

Worship Has Its Reasons

by Earl F. Palmer

What are the reasons we have for what we do as a church in teaching, in serving, in worship? I've been thinking about these questions not only for what they mean to me personally but for what they mean to our common ministry in the Christian fellowship. The heart of it all is straightforward and plain to tell but takes a lifetime to experience. For myself I have three goals as a Christian. First I want to have a centered, worshiping faith that is focused clearly and unmistakably upon Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Second, I want to be a growing biblical Christian who is daily discovering the implications of Christ's reign in my own discipleship journey. Third, I want to make a difference in the places where I live so that Christ's love is shared through my life toward the complicated world around me.

These are my goals. Now the question is, how can they happen? As in every human adventure, it is the primary goal that makes the others possible. This fact is so basic that if this beginning place is vague or confused, then all the plans, programs and strategies that become the activity of my life or my church will lack a lasting foundation. My first goal is to be a centered person who knows who Jesus Christ is and to be a person who is assured of the kingly claim and the kindly love of Jesus Christ in my own life. This centering and assurance happens as I discover the character of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament in its narratives of anticipation and from the New Testament in its narratives of witness. The encouragement that comes from other Christian believers also helps me to make the discovery for myself. But the mystery of it all is that God the Holy Spirit confirms the Scripture and the witness of the Christians so that I am able to say that Jesus Christ is my Lord.

This Lord who stands at the center is the Jesus of history, not the theme of our hopes or the phantom Christ of religious invention, but the Jesus who spoke and acted in human history. This centering goal for my life as a person and as a pastor means that my intention for discipleship and for ministry is to be a biblical Christian. I want to guard against the kind of teaching, preaching and public worship that treats the gospel as a general truth source which I as a pastor interpret through the stories of my own life journey though my own journey bears witness to the Lord of the biblical text. I have a different and a harder

goal than to tell my own story: it is to enable those who I am privileged to teach to read and study the texts of the Bible for themselves, so that, they discover in terms that they can understand the vast truths of the gospel and, so that, they see for themselves where those truths come from.

We have this experience when the Bible is put into our hands, is opened, is read, is talked about, is struggled with, and in one or several exciting moments we hear ourselves and someone else say because of a small group study or during a mission project or in public worship—“Yes, I see what it means.” It has never been enough to tell someone that God loves them; they need to discover that God loves them. By every means and strategy I know, my first goal therefore is to enable a hearing for the witness of the Old and New Testaments and then to leave the conviction of sins and the assurance of belovedness to God. The task of worship and teaching is not manipulation but open statement and lived witness. God must be his own validation.

God uses the friendship and caring witness of our lives as an endorsement of the gospel to other people, but we must not distort this truth and make the mistake of thinking that we are the gospel. The gospel is true and good even when we are not! This is why we stay Christians even when the Christians we know let us down. Jesus Christ is the one who wins each of us to faith because faith is our trust in his trustworthiness. Faith is not trust in the Christians, or the church, or even the worship and sacraments of the church but it is trust in the person Jesus Christ who is greater than the church and greater than our attempts to honor him.

When this first goal is firmly established in my life, there are two results: The one is a refreshing simplification of my ministry task and my life. The second is a refreshing broadening of my life and my ministry task. I am simplified because I know that there is only one true source of meaning.

The sheer size of the Lordship of Jesus Christ has an exciting broadening effect upon my life too. The reign of Christ's love and faithfulness opens up subtleties that go far beyond my expectations of what possibilities are present in life. Therefore we are not surprised that Christian faith has been a persistent inspiration for the poet, the musician, the artist and the philosopher. The gospel also makes the most ordinary tasks meaningful. Christ at the center makes everything better, both the large and the small, so that, we write songs that praise his grandeur or we wash the dishes at a meal for the homeless because his song is in our hearts.

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There is no other first goal, but with this goal as primary then every other secondary goal can happen too. Pascal put it well: “Do great things as though they were small because of Jesus Christ and do small things as though they were great because of Jesus Christ.” But there is another question that confronts each Christian. Where can these three goals happen? Can they happen in the worshiping, serving, learning fellowship we call our church, or are such goals only possible in the secrecy of the soul?

Christians sometimes wonder, “Why should we belong to churches and denominations? Why not just be a Christian and live out our discipleship personally and directly?” But when I read the New Testament I realize that the early Christians were organized so that Paul could write a letter to a fellowship that had deacons and bishops (Phil. 1). Also, one first-century bishop named John would write a book to seven churches in seven cities—each related to each other—which sounds like a denomination to me.

If this is true, then the question is, “What attitude should I take toward the church as an organized institution?” If we look to the Bible for help with that question we are led toward two conclusions; the biblical witness encourages me not to expect too much from the church and not to expect too little.

First, too much: the Christian fellowship is made up of real people in a real place who through the Holy Spirit have discovered the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But God does not cancel out our freedom in this discovery or in the lifelong journey we have as disciples who are growing as Christians. Therefore, the church sometimes disappoints us just as it ministers to us. Nor should we be surprised when the denominations that connect, by tradition and heritage, local congregations are themselves in need of renewal as much as they are a mighty force for mission and renewal. We Protestants have always vigorously thought and argued about what we believe and how discipleship should be lived out, and these sometime arguments can be the result of human stubbornness or a part of our quest for the wholeness of truth; we argue theology and ethics because of the fact that we in the church need to live under the gospel as much as we are to share the gospel. All of this means that we should be realistic in the most healthy way about the church because of what we know of ourselves and of our own weaknesses. It is a company of complicated people who God invites into this worldwide family. It is this complicated community of faith that leads most of us in public worship, in the study of the Bible, in service ministries.

Second, we should also not expect too little from the Christian Church. The mystery of the Holy Spirit is that God makes use of ordinary groups of Christians to make the gospel real and knowable to other ordinary people. Not one of us becomes a Christian without the institution we call the church. God could have used an angel to convert Cornelius, instead he uses an angel to encourage Cornelius to send for a member of the church named Peter the fisherman.

There are times when we think of the church as more fragile than it is! We are often so nervous about the church’s ordinariness that we become too protective toward the congregation of believers in its building with an address and phone number. We convince ourselves that the people are unable to bear strains or straining and therefore every denominational crises or struggle within a congregation about music or styles of worship or pastoral leadership becomes more shocking than the situation deserves. We become too alarmed and disappointed at these strains that are really at heart normal and sometimes in the end healthy.

Here is some good advice I’ve learned from experience. Never become cynical about the family, in spite of every story you hear of unhappy homes. And never become cynical about that ancient fellowship called the church, in spite of every story you hear of the real failures of her people, because at one embarrassing moment you may meet an angel from God Almighty and he may say to you, “Go to church and meet my fisherman Peter there—he will tell you about the meaning of grace.” “Go to church and when two or three of you are gathered together I will be there in the middle.”

Christian faith is profoundly personal and therefore we have our own unique journeys of faith but Christian faith is not private and therefore we need fellowship because it is God’s good provision for our growth in grace. This is where the public worship of Christians and the celebration of the sacraments as signs and seals of the gospel become a vital part of our life as a Christian.

What is worship for a Christian? It is the coming together of the grand themes of discipleship in which we bow before the Lord who has first stooped down to find us. In worship we bring our real selves before God and claim his love in Jesus Christ. Because of this claim worship is confessional both in our admission of our sins and our confession of God’s redeeming love. This gives worship its solemnity. Because of Christ’s victory over sin and death worship is thankfulness expressed and this is what gives worship its sheer celebration. Worship is focused upon Jesus Christ as the way the truth and the life and therefore it is a time and a place of learning from the words of Christ and the words about Christ from Holy Scripture.

This importance of teaching within worship has been a major mark of reformed Christianity so that the sermon in each time of public worship is essential to the heart of it all, in the same way as prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of repentance, and prayers of intercession are inseparable from the fabric of worship. Because the Holy Spirit assures us of Christ’s love and faithfulness worship is also a time of equipping for ministry in the world for all who are receiving the grace of Christ. Because the Lord at the center draws believers and enquirers toward himself we find brothers and sisters who are being drawn to that center and this discovery creates fellowship within the community of faith that is another mark of worship. These are people like ourselves who are in need of grace and this gives to Christian worship its humanity with all the problems and joys that are the result of that coming

together of those men and women, girls and boys who want to worship God.

But there is one more important ingredient. Because worship so deeply stirs the human soul we find ways to express that mixture of responses in the music of worship. Music has become such a vital part of the worship of Christians it needs to be considered in a special way. What is there about music that makes it so significant, so comforting, so challenging and so controversial?

Why has music taken on such importance in our contemporary culture? Popular music that is highly focused and consciously directed toward a specific age generation, namely the younger person in the society as a whole, has been an increasingly important force in western culture in the second half of this century. The exploding technology of TV, motion pictures and transistors have intensified the power and communication possibility of music so that it has become an event of expression and communication that people are able to experience universally and instantly in any place or time they choose. The power of this almost immediate communication possibility has staggering implications culturally, politically and spiritually.

The music we hear is itself never static or fixed and it continues to evolve through different rhythmic, melodic, lyrical and even in loudness/softness, but what stays constant is its importance to the generation that hears and listens to it. We who want to understand youth in America will make a serious mistake if we underestimate the importance that music represents to the teenager today. Every survey of youth values and opinion reveals that music is for most youth the single most treasured input into their daily lives.

The generational directedness of music in this century became most noticeable during the years of World War II as song writers and performers directed and communicated music to the young men and women who were fighting in a world war during those crisis years. Those youth songs of the 1940's were highly focused and the themes in their lyrics all related in one way or another to a very definite age, to a shared worry, and a shared hope. Since then, that focusing trend continued and has become even more consciously and tightly directed to very special groups of people, not only age but race and life style advocacy as well.

What does all of this mean? First, our feelings for music are directly tied to our feelings about ourselves. The most significant clue to the personhood role of music today I believe is found in this special directedness. Music is therefore both a bond and a fence. Music bonds together those persons who know and appreciate the unique rhythms, sounds and lyrics of their music and thereby music provides an inner circle of knowing companions, however, at the same moment what is a bond is also a fence of protection against a larger unknowing circle. The music box and the personal "walkman" therefore provide both a secret and an enjoyable time of inner place and privacy, and for those other friends who understand the

tempo and sounds, music becomes a means of community. Music is a secret to be kept and it is also a language of communication and both happen at exactly the same time.

My own experience determines what I like, but when others are able to understand, then my music becomes our music. It is then that a single tune becomes a folk song, a patriotic song, or when it is a lyric of personal conviction about God's grace it becomes a Christian hymn. Communities large and small are created by many building blocks and one of the most durable building block ingredients of all is music. Wherever songs are sung they tell a story about who we are: songs at a campfire, songs at a school game, songs in a church, songs at an Olympic award ceremony, songs in a car radio, songs when everyone is cheering, songs when our hearts are breaking, songs in the night at home, songs in prison. Music is ours to fully own and at the same moment, it is a marvelously rich gift that we share with others.

What are the generations to do when they cannot really understand or feel that certain resonance at the sounds of another generation's music? I have two suggestions that appear to take opposite directions. First I believe it is important to preserve for each other person that privilege that Paul Tournier calls "the right to keep my secret." This means that we who desire to know and communicate with people who live in another time and place from our own must respect the mystery and secret of that neighbor's own place. We cannot force our way into the inner solitude of any other human being, even of the people we love very much. "Very inquisitive people rarely hear secrets" (Tournier) but at the same time almost every human being wants to share good secrets and music is one of our own best secrets. Our role, therefore, as a trans-generational or transcultural friend is to try to learn how to listen and to respect the music of other cultures and other generations. Since music is the most easily shared secret between people and cultures, we might very wisely begin our efforts of crosscultural communication with music.

Christian faith has always sung its greatest themes in the music of each generation and I believe we owe every new generation a listening ear and an open heart to learn the songs of each new time so that we are able to share with one another the songs that worship the living God. We should encourage the new songs of faith and honor them for what they really are, the psalms of our life. What we discover when this happens is that the timeless hope and love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is as wonderfully portrayed in the new motifs of the music of youth as in the older themes of previous generations.

The Christian faith has a long and friendly alliance with music that goes far back into the Old Testament and has continued until now. Throughout that journey of tunes and words and rhythms, certain ones will stand out as our most favored Christian music.

Let me share some of the titles of Christian songs and works that mean the most to me:

1. First the carols of Christmas—they stand apart in their own special place. I love them all, especially *O Come All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night*
2. Great works—for me the greatest four are: Handel’s *Messiah*, Brahms’ *Requiem*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, and Bach’s *Passion of St. Matthew*
3. Praise music— *Give Thanks*
4. Gospel—*Redeemed, Blessed Assurance, Amazing Grace, What a Friend We Have in Jesus*
5. Spirituals—*Deep River, Swing Low Sweet Chariot*
6. Great hymns—*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, Now Thank We All Our God, O Worship The King, Crown Him With Many Crowns, And Can It Be That I Should Gain?, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, O God of Earth and Altar, Eternal Father, Strong to Save, Praise The Savior, Ye Who Know Him, How Great Thou Art!*

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Study 5: Confessions and the Doctrine of Man

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

Note: “Man” is used in the generic sense, as in the Greek work *anthropos*.

By an overwhelming majority vote in June 1994, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations rejected congregation Beth Adam’s application seeking affiliation with Reform Judaism. The reason: Beth Adam is a humanistic Cincinnati congregation that has eliminated the word “God” from its liturgies. “I believe that the concept of God is the very foundation of Judaism,” said Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the union. “The quest for God defines us as a people. It is our mission, our historic calling.”

The Presbyterian Church today encounters myriads of philosophies and ideologies that have the appearance of “religious” or “theological” but do not conform to the biblical definitions of man.¹ Once the thin veneer of religion or theology is stripped, it exposes a godless doctrine of man. This is a kind of atheistic anthropology that defines humanity by a human standard while pronouncing the death of the God who has been revealed in Scripture.

There is a Beaten Path

In the early twentieth century, Mildred Cable and Francesca French, missionaries with China Inland Mission, frequently traveled across the Gobi desert to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. As a seasoned veteran in the desert terrain, Mildred shared her experience in desert travel. Caravans don’t wander randomly through the sands but follow clearly defined and well-known roads. When a road is obscured by sand from sandstorms, the traveler waits until the road re-emerges. After centuries of countless sandstorms and sand drifts, the ancient roads for the caravans are still visible, still in use by modern travelers.

Most people are familiar with the infamous “mirages” in the desert, but they are unfamiliar with the false sounds heard by desert travelers. Some of these sounds are perceived as urgent calls for help, so the traveler is tempted to stop or digress to investigate. Unknown numbers of travelers have strayed from the beaten path and walked straight to their own death while attempting to track down the source of those deceptive sounds. But the wise desert guide discourages the traveler from chasing down every urgent sound and keeps the traveler on the road.

As the culture of the 1990s elevates the status of “victims” to “heroes,” the Presbyterian community of faith has heard many sounds, sometimes called voices. Many of these sounds imitate calls for help: the marginalized women crushed by emotional pain, the disenfranchised ethnic minority damaged by inequality, and the discriminated homosexuals clamoring for equal rights. Indeed, the followers of Jesus Christ are called “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”² However, the desert traveler who wanders from the beaten path ultimately looks to man as the source of help, forgets that “God is my help”³ and ignores Jesus Christ who is “the Way.”⁴

What Are the False Sounds of Our Time?

Today there are numerous popular teachings sold under the brand name “Christian” that bear no family resemblance to the Christian view of man. These teachings formulate a humanistic doctrine of man, sharing several common threads:

- (1) They presuppose the autonomy of man. They ignore God’s standards and discard God’s law revealed in Scripture.
- (2) They assume the perfectibility of man. They depend on human effort to alleviate the imperfections of the human condition.
- (3) They measure spiritual success by socioeconomic equity. Scripture is dismissed and God is reconstructed when they stand in the way of the goal of equal access to the socioeconomic pie.
- (4) They divorce personal piety from social transformation. Social progress is achieved by structural change apart from personal change of heart and character.
- (5) They dismiss the Christian doctrine of sin because such doctrine is incompatible with the idea of perfectibility of man. Therefore, the only sin they recognize is “social sin,” or sinful structures and systems. There is no such thing as sinful lives but only the sin of intolerance of such lifestyles.

How Did We Lose Our Way?

Disguised as a theological doctrine of man, this type of secular humanism was not kept outside the church’s doors. Instead, professing Christians embraced these humanistic thought patterns.

“The 1960s crisis of values within the Western intelligentsia ought to have elicited a clear polarization between religious and secular attitudes on such fundamental matters as the doctrine of man. In practice this did not happen, and at least part of the explanation is to be found in the willingness of Christian thinkers to adopt the same moral and intellectual outlook as the Humanists.”⁵

While Scripture and the Confessions teach that man is alienated from God, secular humanism teaches that man is alienated from himself. For the secular humanist, salvation comes exclusively in the form of “social salvation” and is devoid of any personal dimension. “Man can only fulfil his potentialities, realize himself, in harmony with others, and his ‘salvation,’ as it were, can only be truly realized in the salvation of all.”⁶

To the secular humanist Karl Marx, it is quite evident that the sole cause of man’s alienation is the capitalist social system. The cure, therefore, as the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 made clear, is to alter the economic and social structures. By the same token, the religious humanist believes that the sole cause of man’s alienation is the social system. The social system is what germinates and perpetuates patriarchal domination, heterosexual domination, and white ethnic domination. The cure, needless to say, is to overthrow such patriarchal constructs, heterosexual systems, and white ethnic structures.

The core problem of religious humanism is not its commitment to social justice. The core problem of religious humanism is that it uses God as a tool rather than surrenders to God as the Ultimate Ruler. As a result, religious humanism targets a very narrow agenda of penultimate issues and misses the ultimate solution altogether. It never even got on the beaten path.

How Can We Return to the Beaten Path?

Written over a span of many centuries, both Scripture and the Confessions teach a consistent and coherent doctrine of man that provides ultimate answers to the ultimate questions. This truly Christian doctrine of man pivots upon God and emerges from God’s revelation. To the extent that man cannot know God or Jesus Christ except through God’s written revelation, Scripture is the final arbiter of what qualifies as Christian doctrine of man. In other words, God defines man.

The creeds, catechisms and confessions reveal a consistent doctrine of man which employs the following approaches:

(1) Relational Approach

As created beings, humans cannot attain to genuine self-knowledge unless we define our humanness in relation to God our Creator. The confessions consistently usher man onto the stage by identifying man as a creature created in God’s image.⁷ John Calvin teaches the necessity of this relational approach, “Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. . . the Lord. . . is the sole standard. . . .”⁸

Theologians of this century echo Calvin’s teaching. Emil Brunner writes, “From the outset the human ‘I’ is limited by a concrete ‘Thou’, and only so does it become a concretely responsible Self. . . .”⁹ John Leith also writes about this “I-Thou” relationship, “. . . most human beings

have at the boundary of their existence, on occasion at least, encountered a mystery, however vague and diffused, that can only be understood as a ‘Thou’ and for which the word God has seemed the most appropriate response.”¹⁰

(2) Historical Approach

The primeval history of man is the history of the “I-Thou” relationship between God, the Creator, and man, the creature. His story (history) is the story of man—told by God. Thus the confessions consistently identify these historical events:

* Creation

Humankind was created in God’s image to reflect, among many things, God’s own righteousness and holiness.¹¹

* Fall

Adam and Eve, the first parents of the human race, disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. They fell from the original state of righteousness and holiness. The image of God in man was thus marred.¹² By this first disobedience of the first parents, all humans “became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin.”¹³ “Our human life is so poisoned that we are all conceived and born in the state of sin.” However, “no mere creature can bear the burden of God’s eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.”¹⁵

* Redemption

Being incompetent to save himself, man needs a Savior. God provided the Mediator and Redeemer who is fully human and fully God. This Savior must be fully human so that as a true and righteous man he can pay the price for sin as a man. He must also be fully God “so that by the power of his divinity he might bear as a man the burden of God’s wrath, and recover for us and restore to us righteousness and life.”¹⁵ Therefore, we “openly profess and preach that Jesus Christ is the sole Redeemer and Savior of the world. . . so that we are not now to look for any other.”¹⁶ By repentance, a sinner recognizes sin as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, turns away from sin and to God, and resolves to live a new life in obedience to God’s commands. Although salvation is not effected by repentance—because it is an act of grace—no sinner may expect forgiveness without repentance.¹⁷

(3) Theocentric Approach

When defining the Christian view of man, acknowledging God as the center is more than just acknowledging his existence. The theocentric approach to the doctrine of man requires us to hold up God’s law as standard. Man is incapable of accurate self-assessment unless he places God at the center and adopts God’s law as binding for his life. John Calvin writes, “. . . man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”¹⁸

When God is removed from the center, man replaces God. The one true God becomes just a hopeful candidate applying for the job. In spite of its God-talk, this

anthropocentric approach to the doctrine of man is no more and no less than religious humanism. The problem with this man-centered approach is the callousness to and the denial of sin.

“Self-deception about our sin is a narcotic, a tranquilizing and disorienting suppression of our spiritual nervous system. . . Eventually, we make ourselves religiously tone deaf so that we miss both the exposition and the recapitulation of the main theme God plays in human life. This music of creation and the still greater music of grace whistle right through our skulls, causing no catch of the breath and leaving no residue. Moral beauty begins to bore us. The idea that the human race needs a Savior sounds quaint.”¹⁹

(4) Teleological Approach

Man is created for a purpose: to glorify God and enjoy him forever.²⁰ By the first disobedience of the first parents, the entire human race has become incapable of achieving this purpose. Through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God regenerates man and restores his ability to live according to God’s purpose. “To meet man in his sinful condition and recreate in man God’s idea is a well-authenticated actuality of the Christian gospel.”²¹

Unlike religious humanism, the biblical doctrine of man teaches that God is man’s *telos* (destiny). This explains why Scripture and the Confessions consistently and insistently highlight human accountability (instead of human autonomy), personal repentance and transformation (instead of social restructuring), and human responsibility (instead of human rights). Alexander Solzhenitsyn hits the bull’s eye when he says, “The West has finally achieved the rights of man . . . but man’s sense of responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer.”

Conclusion

Those who confess Jesus is the Christ must match their doctrine of man with the biblical doctrine of man. They must demonstrate a readiness to relate to God as the Sovereign Creator, a keen awareness of man’s history as told by God, a willingness to make God the center of their lives, and a commitment to God’s purpose for man. Plantinga summarizes this calling in these words:

The gifts of God—vitality, love, forgiveness, courage against evil, joy at our depths, and everything else that flows from the terrible work of Christ—may be found only in the company of God. And we keep company with God only by adopting God’s purposes as our own and following through on them. . . . Despite certain modern assumptions, life with God isn’t mainly a matter of knuckling under to our superior, the image that modernity so much detests. We do have to trust and obey, not first of all to be ‘happy in Jesus’, but rather to rise to the full stature of sons and daughters, to mature into the image of God, to grow into adult roles in the business of redeeming the world. . . . God

wants not slaves but intelligent grownup children who show enthusiasm for the family business.²²

Questions

1. What are the distinct qualities of a truly theological doctrine of man?
2. Why is it critical to distinguish “man’s story as told by man” and “man’s story as told by God”?
3. What is the place of God’s revelation in the formulation of the doctrine of man?
4. Identify some safeguards that will protect us from wandering off the beaten path?
5. Articulate the relationship between personal salvation and social transformation.
6. Compare and contrast:
 - (a) Secular humanism and religious humanism;
 - (b) Religious humanism and the biblical doctrine of man.

1 In this article, the term “man” is used in the generic sense, as in the Greek word *anthropos*.

2 Micah 6:8

3 Psalm 121:1-2

4 John 14:6

5 Edward Norman, “Christianity and the World Order,” The BBC Reith Lectures, 1978, Oxford OUP 1979, p.10, 11. Quoted by H.D. McDonald, *The Christian View of Man*, (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1981) p.119

6 N.M. McDonald, *The Aggressive Freedom: A Comparative Study of Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard*, Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Birmingham 1974, p. 34. Quoted by H.D. McDonald, op. cit., p. 117

7 Nicene 1.1; Apostles 2.1; Scots 3.02; Heidelberg 4:006; Second Helvetic 5.034; Westminster 6.022-6.023; SC 7.001, 7.010; LC 7.111, 7.127; Brief Statement 10.3

8 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book I, Ch.1.2

9 Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press) p.107

10 John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) p. 90

11 Colossians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 11:7; Ephesians 4:23-24

12 Scots 3.02; Heidelberg 4.006-4.007; Second Helvetic 5.036; Westminster 6.031-6.036; SC 7.013; LC 7.131; 1967 Confession 9.12-9.13; Brief Statement 10.3

13 Scots 3.03

14 Heidelberg 4.007, 4.014 cf. Second Helvetic 5.037

15 Heidelberg 4.017 cf. Westminster 6.043

16 Second Helvetic 5.077; Westminster 6.044, 6.056

17 Westminster 6.083

18 Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book I, Ch. 1.3

19 Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Natural Born Sinners: Why We Flee From Guilt and the Notion of Sin,” *Christianity Today*, November 14, 1994, p.27

20 SC 7.001; LC 7.111; Psalms 95-100

21 H.D. McDonald, op. cit., p. 126

22 Cornelius Plantinga, op. cit. p. 32

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News from Around the World

THE PRESBYTERIAN COALITION'S website www.presbycoalition.org has the latest revision of the Strategies for Renewal.

THE PRESBYTERIAN LAYMAN has discovered links from the Presbyterian Church (USA) National Network of Presbyterian College Women (NNPCW) website under "resources we recommend" that led to sites containing hard core pornography. Layman editor, Parker Williamson, in a letter to the General Assembly Council Special Committee to Evaluate the NNPCW wrote, "I discovered that the official Presbyterian Church (USA) website, sponsored and maintained by the NNPCW, has been serving as an Internet gateway to hard core homosexual pornography. Following links initially recommended as resources by NNPCW, I found my way to a lesbian dating service (only three key strokes from the official church page). Continuing through interlocking links that started with a NNPCW recommendation, I reached animated pictures depicting aberrant forms of sexual behavior. . . ."

The General Assembly voted twice to defund the National Network of Presbyterian College Women at last June's Assembly. After the second vote on Friday night at 10:30 p.m., Moderator Oldenburg allowed a carefully orchestrated demonstration to take place in the Assembly Hall led by women from the NNPCW, Women's Advocacy and Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. After the demonstration, Oldenburg lamented the Assembly's decision to defund and suggested someone who voted with majority might call for a vote to reconsider. Vice-Moderator Jim Mead offered the motion to reconsider which then passed the Assembly.

Saturday morning Mead offered a motion to have the matter referred to a committee that would examine the NNPCW's "resources and programs" and report back to next year's Assembly. The motion passed but not before several commissioners protested the manipulation the night before. Moderator Oldenburg and Vice-Moderator Mead will serve on the committee along with several members of the General Assembly Council.

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