DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul

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Editorial: Let's Do More of This

There is much, I think and hope, to celebrate in this issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*, as it ranges across heartfelt worry about global warming, what the Good Samaritan might (or not) look like today, and a host of other parables, poems, and columns.

But what I want to highlight is that this *DSM* includes the most complex set of articles published so far.

As authors Bruce Hiebert and Willard Swartley discuss Swartley's book *Homosexuality*, their scholarship is evident. When editing Swartley I pondered, for example, how to handle his reference to Second Isaiah,which reflects the conclusion of many biblical scholars that the book of Isaiah was written by more than one person. I tried adding "(Second)" to Isaiah in a not entirely satisfactory effort to alert puzzled readers that Swartley is referring to a part of Isaiah.

And this fertility theology thing. What was with that? I couldn't say I'd ever really worried about this before.

So should *DSM*, I wondered, be publishing material perhaps more at home in academic journals? I finally concluded that it should, at least in this case, for several reasons:

First, though the articles may be a stretch for the many among us who are not scholars, they point to the value of such scholarship. Here two well-trained, passionate thinkers wrestle in the context of a pressing issue with how to read the Bible's message to the church today. Here we see how those who study both the Bible and contemporary life can help us grasp why this ancient book deserves still to shape our lives today.

Respond with sharp critique and incisive wit—even as you show that you know your view is not God's only truth.

Second, I would like to see *DSM* even more involved in publishing responsible yet diverse understandings of pressing issues. What convinces me *DSM* should publish on the explosive topic of homosexuality is not that either author has the one right view. Rather, what I value is that they manage to do what seems rarely to happen in discussions of this matter: Even as they sometimes talk past the other, against the other, or over our heads, they also each actually take the other seriously, respect and maybe even learn from the other.

Third, watching them tussle with each other's perspectives on this polarizing subject makes me dream of what could happen if this were how Christians worked at engaging each other whenever we disagree.

Hence my invitation to you readers and authors: Let's do more of this! Write your passionate views. Submit the articles that make us take notice because you care so much about the insight that has pulled you into the writing. Pound out the letters! Respond with sharp critique and incisive wit—even as you show that you know your view is not God's only truth and you have something yet to learn from your opponent. Help fill these pages with life like that, and let's see how much of the dream we can fulfill.

—Michael A. King

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In this issue

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How Not To Be a Mennonite

In memory of Aunt Esther

Somehow I always knew better
how not
to be a Mennonite

Those aunts of mine, some divorced,
some who left the Church
since there was no room for their woman strength
their brilliant minds, their artistic flare.
They found their niche in other places
and served like missionaries in cities
far away from the Pennsylvania fields where they grew up.
Singing, sculpting, writing, teaching, and doctoring
they moved the world.

Those musicians who played jazzy music
blues and bebop
and kept time with their bodies,
drank beer, smoked cigarettes,
frequented bars.
Their music was dark and seedy next to the
heavenly church choirs singing "Elijah" and "The Messiah,"
and Brahms' "Requiem."
The Mennonite Men in black suits
standing straight and tall, never moving
never swaying
as they sang about joy
and seeing God as they passed through the gates of heaven.
I knew it was a sin, but I believed God's music
came from a saxophone
and the Holy Spirit wrote the blues.

That Sunday morning I stood in front and blew my horn
as the congregation sang "Precious Lord"
I wished I could I bring them in, my aunts who couldn't stay,
to show them how to be a Mennonite.

—*Joyce Peachey Lind is a mother, teacher, and musician who lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is pursuing an M.A.T. in Early Childhood Education at James Madison University.*

How Swartley Gets It Wrong

A Review of Homosexuality

Bruce Hiebert

Willard Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2003.

As much as I must honor Willard Swartley as a profound teacher of the church, his most recent book, *Homosexuality*, is the articulation of a theology of human sexuality more appropriate to a fertility religion than to Christianity.

The foundation of Swartley's book is chapter 2, i which he begins by quoting Karl Barth to the effect that there is in God's good creation a fundamental sexual duality of male and female. Barth's position is this: There are in creation men and women. They are distinct, different, and unequal aspects of the way God created humanity, and their difference is *essential* to the created order (*Church Dogmatics,* T. & T. Clark, 1936-1970, 3:1:288, 301, and 3:4:116ff.). According to Barth, this is what it means for humanity to be in God's image.

This is on the surface an appealing reading, and it is not surprising at first that Swartley takes this direc-

tion. It seems to make sense; that is how the world seems to work and how many cultures have understood the world.

But it is not a good reading of the Bible. The source text is Genesis 1:27, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NRSV). The text does indicate that males and females are together created in the image of God. It says nothing at all, however, about the meaning of the *difference* between men and women. While it may mean that men and women (in opposition to most social perspectives) are equal before God, it could also mean men and women share in one "human-divine" image.

What Genesis cannot mean is that the differences between men and women are fundamental to human existence before God. While the text recognizes the mundane sexual differences, it is human unity with a God who is not sexually divided that is the point. The text assumes males are different from females; the good news for humans is that this does not disturb their unity with God!

However, this wrong interpretation by Barth and Swartley is an appealing move in the theological argument Swartley is developing. If you accept the premise that male and female are foundational to divinely ordered human existence, then the rest of his book follows logically. Built on this foundation, all texts that reflect this duality take primacy over any texts that suggest some alternative. With regard to homosexuality, then, the case is closed: homosexuality violates the fundamental order.

But arguing from created orders is a notoriously difficult task. The Bible itself does not permit such an easy reading and in fact requires a pre-acceptance of the Barth/Swartley premise to come up with anything approaching such a "normative" view of human sexuality, let alone the exclusion of homosexuality. From the rest of Genesis through the Song of Solomon and Proverbs to the apostle Paul, sexuality has many complex and difficult meanings in the Bible.

Further, Swartley's foundation is anything but appealing once the implications are examined. Karl Barth himself uses this reading to justify the inequality of women and men (men are created to dominate; it is inherent to their maleness and "no shame to women" (*CD* 3:1:301).

Barth's reading also asks us to place God's creation as theologically before God's redemption; this is completely backward to orthodox Anabaptist thought. This is clear as soon as we ask, Does fertility, the ability to procreate, have an effect on salvation? Swartley's logic calls for a yes.

If there is any doubt that a fertility religion was other than Swartley's orientation, then he would have spent the bulk of his time trying to understand the one passage in the Bible that attempts to develop a Christian perspective on what might be called creation orders. I refer to the view of the apostle Paul expressed in Galatians 3:28. There Paul argues that in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. . . " (NRSV). This is the apostle Paul's hymn to the putting aside of human barriers "in Christ." But you can look in vain through *Homosexuality* for any serious discussion of this foundational Christian text. (It receives a passing aside on p. 64 and is then misquoted as part of a slightly longer mention on p. 98.

A serious discussion of the Galatians passage would force Swartley to conclude that the apostle Paul saw human existence in its maleness and femaleness as not foundationally relevant to Christian existence. In making this case, the apostle Paul may even be basing it on Genesis 1:27. (See Terence Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles,* Fortress, 1997; Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah,* U.B.C. Press, 1987; Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians,* Yale Univ. Press, 1983.)

A serious discussion of the Galatians passage would force Swartley to conclude that the apostle Paul saw human existence in its maleness and femaleness as not foundationally relevant to Christian existence.

Another possibility is that Paul is referencing Greek concepts of androgeneity, concepts that link with his understanding of Christ as *anthropos* (Ernst Kaseman, *Commentary on Romans,* Eerdmans, 1980).

In either case, we are forced to recognize that Paul is driving at a human unity/identity that occurs "behind" biological existence. Regardless, it is precisely the duality of male and female that is *not* present in Christ, even though men and women *are* present in the church.

A third possibility is that the apostle Paul is building on Jewish concepts of the priority of humanity over males and females in God's creation, a possibility drawn to my attention by Willard Swartley. If this is the case, it only reinforces the points already made.

According to Paul, it is as "created in the image of God" or "as an aspect of Christ-existence" that men and women participate in the body of Christ. Therefore there cannot be a moral or ethical distinction made between them. As Paul is at great pains to point out in most parts of his writings, what applies to men applies equally and exactly the same way to women.

However, and it is important to recognize, this is not something he argues with respect to either Jew or Greek (Jew is better) or slave or free (free is better). The apostle Paul is not entirely consistent in this regard. See especially 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. However, even within this text, in verse 12, Paul argues that to see this difference as foundational is wrong. (I also note that the contemporary Mennonite church does not see the apostle Paul as speaking authoritatively at this point.)

The position that must be read from the apostle Paul about the duality of men and women is that it does not exist "in Christ." It has no "sav-

ing" significance and is not a "mark" that belongs to Christians. Male and female? It makes no difference at all. Being "in Christ" takes place at a point outside of our self-experience as men or women.

Therefore the long line of argument that starts from the position of foundational sexual duality and concludes with a contemporary Christian command to heterosexuality must be eliminated. Christian sexual ethics begin elsewhere. As I have said, despite his citation of the Bible, Swartley is arguing the ethics of a religion that places fertility ahead of salvation.

Not homosexuals, not gossips, not murderers, not insolent children, not slanderers; none of us can be denied access to the fullness of the Church once we confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

Another weakness of *Homosexuality* is its treatment of Romans 1:18-32, perhaps the one passage in the Bible that does indicate a Christianly negative response to "homosexuality." (Here and elsewhere I place quotes around "homosexuality." I do so because, though it is not fully germane to this discussion of Swartley's book, I find the easy use of the term "homosexuality" out of keeping with its complex history as a concept.)While Swartley correctly sees that the context of this passage is idolatry, he fails to follow through on this insight for the interpretation of the passage.

If it is idolatry that is the source of the problems, then everything Paul identifies is an example of what the fundamental powers of the universe wreak once *God* has turned idolaters over to the powers they have determined to worship. These consequences include "homosexuality" (1:26-27), and also evil, murder, God-hating, gossip, insolence, and disobedience to parents (1:29-31). These consequences are all, according to Paul, punishable by death (1:32).

It is appealing to read this passage as indicating that these behaviors are abominations and signs of apostasy; however, to do so is to misread the logic of the text. Paul is clear: Idolatry leads to a foundational change of state for these persons, and that in turns leads to a wreaking of havoc in their lives.

The issue for Paul is not the behavior, not the homosexuality, evil, murder, God-hating or disobedience to parents, though he obviously finds all of these things distasteful. The issue for Paul is idolatry. It is wrong worship he opposes.

To try to make the issues in this set of verses the behavior of the persons (rather than their idolatry) is to condemn the symptoms and not the cause. It is as if a doctor determined to treat the fever that comes from pneumonia with an ice bath, not through the application of antibiotics. To turn analogy into allegory, a better reading of the apostle Paul says that idolatry is just as fatal as untreated pneumonia. So bring in the doctor (Christ) to get at the causal bacteria (idolatry) by means of the antibiotic (confessing Jesus as Lord) and the symptoms will disappear.

Once the text is seen as the carefully constructed rhetorical-logical sequence that it is, further use of this passage against those in the church who experience homosexual desires or engage in homosexual acts collapses. Once people confess Jesus Christ as Lord, they are not idolaters. They are Christians regardless of past or future behavior. Not homosexuals, not gossips, not murderers, not insolent children, not slanderers; none of us can be denied access to the fullness of the church once we confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

However, the good news of Swartley's work is that exclusion is not what he advocates. Despite a fertility religion-based argument throughout the bulk of the book, his fundamental Christianity leads him to speak for inclusion of "homosexual" persons in the church (see his Appendix 2; here and elsewhere I place quotes around "homosexuality." While it is not germane to this discussion of Swartley's book, I find the easy use of the term "homosexuality" out of keeping with its complex history as a concept).

Finally, a strength of Swartley's book is that he seeks empirical support for his position in the life of the church. Accepting that challenge, we are forced to ask, How does God use those who experience homosexual desires and engage in homosexual acts and also confess Jesus as Lord?

The answer is clear: We find some of them providing valued ministries as pastoral counselors, teachers, Mennonite Central Committee workers, Christian Peacemaker Team members, and even congregational leaders and pastors. Their possession by God does not, in some cases, eradicate desire or behavior, but does transform them into vessels through which God's community can be strengthened and God's grace spread into the world.

Homosexuality fails at the levels of Christian theology, Christian biblical interpretation, and existing Mennonite experience. As much as I appreciate Willard Swartley and am deeply appreciative that he was willing to accept the challenge of addressing the issue of human sexuality with such bravery and clarity, I cannot accept that he has in this case reasoned in a manner congruent with the key Christian emphases I've highlighted in this review.

Instead we are still waiting for a biblical Christian reference work that will enable Mennonites to deal effectively with the ethics of human sexuality.

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How Hiebert's "Wild" Critique Gets *Homosexuality* Wrong

Willard Swartley

I agree with Hiebert's basic point that Galatians 3:28 (the believer's standing in Christ) could have been a good starting point of my book, in dialogue perhaps with Gen. 1:26-27. I chose, however, to follow the canonical order (as in *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women*) and then emphasize the "in Christ" identity as the culminating point of my work.

I stress throughout Chapters 5–9 that our "in Christ" identity is primary for Christian believers, not sexual identity (see pp. 88-91, 101, 130, 133). On that fundamental point I believe we agree.

It is difficult to know how seriously to take Hiebert's charge that my book promotes a "fertility theology," since in an email to me he said he is responding to how others have been reading my book, not how he himself read it or how I intended it. The charge, however, appears to be damning, for it punctuates his review, though nowhere does he say what he means by "fertility" theology.

The most damning meaning would be that I think the Judeo-Christian faith is another form of Baalism, using the worship cult to promote sexual fertility. Another meaning could be that my book is "procreation oriented," which is not true by any fair reading of pp. 26-28 and throughout. Still another meaning would be to regard "fertility" positively, the creative capacity of a married male and female to conceive and bear children. What an awe-filled mysterious gift of God! For this view, ask a couple struggling with infertility what their view of fertility is. If meant this way, his review compliments!

Biblical creation theology is not an inferior species to redemption theology. Creation theology . . . is firmly anchored in the redemption theology of the covenant people.

I assume the "procreation" meaning, with shades of the first meaning implied, since the charge seeks to discount the book because it is seen as not reasoned in a Christian manner. Whether I am responding to Hiebert or to how others (mis)read my book, I note the following:

"Fertility religion" belongs to Baalism and other religions of Israel's neighbors, providing sex with cult-worship through temple prostitutes (in some cases same-sex) as sacred! With this my book has nothing in common.

Biblical creation theology is not an inferior species to redemption theology. Creation theology—whether Genesis 1–2, Psalm 104, or (Second) Isaiah—is firmly anchored in the redemption theology of the covenant people.

Hiebert's attack of Barth to condemn "fertility theology" is misplaced. No voice in the history of contemporary theology (nineteenth century on) is as strong as Barth's in opposing natural religion (in which fertility theology falls). Recall his famous "*Nein*" in 1938 to Emil Brunner on general revelation. If any theologian stands firmly against "fertility theology," it has been, is, and ever will be Karl Barth.

Hiebert critiques Karl Barth on his exposition of "Man and Woman." He misreads Barth, partly because of an error in the English translation of the German. In *CD* 3.4 Barth exposits both the differentiation and oneness of *hâ'adâm* as male and female, as parallel to God's plurality-in-singularity (pp. 116-168). Only on pages 169ff. does the question of "order" in creation emerge. Barth does not deny equality but says that in the "order" of God's creation of Man (*hâ'adâm*) as male and female there is not *simply* reciprocity and equality ("*nicht einfach reziprok und gleichmäßig ist*" [3.1:344]). The reason is that man did not come from woman, but woman from man.

Nowhere does Barth imply the right or nature of man to dominate woman. When he says that this *order* "does indeed reveal inequality," he immediately counter-says, "But it does not do so without immediately

confirming their equality" (*CD* 3.4:170).

Further, "The exploitation of this order by man, in consequence of which he exalts himself over woman, making himself her lord and master and humiliating and offending her so that she inevitably finds herself oppressed and injured, has nothing whatever to do with divine order."

For Barth creation theology is not separate from redemption theology (Gal. 3:28 appears often in his discussion)!

I first learned my textual exegesis in *Homosexuality* (pp. 26-28) from Phyllis Trible. The same exegesis in my earlier book (*SSWW*) was lauded by those seeking place for women in leadership. Read Trible's four points of exposition I sum up in *SSWW* (pp. 153-154). I wonder how Hiebert would have responded to my interpretation if I had cited Trible instead of Barth.

To pit redemption theology against creation theology is perilous. Christ is the agent of creation (Col. 1:15-17). To make creation theology inferior to redemption theology is the first step toward Marcion's pitfall, leading him to regard the OT God as inferior to the NT God.

The "historicality" (limits and freedoms of living within time, space, and biology) of redemption theology is important. Jesus Christ incarnate means that our new identity in Christ as neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female does not cancel our historicality in which we continue as Jew or Greek in ethnic identity, slave or free in social status (at least in the first century), and male and female in sexual identity.

In the context of this verse (beginning with v. 21) emphasis falls on "the faith of and the believer's faith in Jesus Christ" as the means of salvation, no other qualifiers. Moving out from the text the emphasis falls on becoming heirs: what believers inherit by virtue of the new standing in Christ.

Paul is even more explicit on this in 2 Corinthians 6:18. Both women and men equally inherit the royal promise (see my discussion of Paul's audacity here, in *Homosexuality,* p. 65).

I value Galatians 3:28, as my *SSWW* contribution shows (pp. 165-167). But what does it have to do with homosexuality? Nothing more than what I say often in *Homosexuality*: that our "in Christ" identity eclipses our sexual identity. Here I agree with Hiebert. I recommend a key article on whether affirming equality of women and men in Christ leads us to accepting same-sex practice (Catherine Clark Kroeger, "Does Belief in Women's Equality Lead to an Acceptance of Homosexual Practice?" *Priscilla Papers* 18, Spring 2004, 3-10).

In an earlier response to Hiebert, on Galatians 3:28, I noted that Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin laments that Paul's great achievement, the "one new humanity" through Jesus Messiah, has been interpreted as a universal vision of equality and inclusion that results in loss of particular identities: Jews as Jews, women as women, and so forth

While Boyarin argues that Paul advocates human liberation and equality, he also pleads for not equating equality with sameness, a serious flaw in Paul's social thought—or our interpretation of it! (See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*: *Paul and the Politics of Identity,* University of California Press, Ltd, 1994. On this question of race and identity in Paul, see also Denise Kimber Buell and Carolyne Johnson Hodge, "The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul," *JBL* 123, 2004, 235-51. The article argues for a reading of Paul that preserves ethnic identities, even power differences, though all are one in Christ.)

My emphasis on celibacy as a response to living with same-sex orientation . . . precludes the charge of fertility theology.

Boyarin objects to insisting on any special value acceded to particularity as well as to universality. Though both are necessary, both are problematic. Boyarin proposes that a synthesis to this dialectic must be found, "one that will allow for stubborn hanging on to ethnic, cultural specificity but in a context of deeply felt and enacted human solidarity" (p. 257).

Applying Boyarin to the issue at hand, replacing ethnic identity with male/female identity, I adapt the quote: "a synthesis to this dialectic must be found, one that will allow for stubborn hanging on to sexual, biological specificity but in a context of deeply felt and enacted human solidarity." I add: "in Christ."

My emphasis on celibacy as a response to living with same-sex orientation—difficult to value in our culture that lacks support of celibacy—precludes the charge of fertility theology. My valuing of celibacy applies to both homosexual and heterosexual people. I speak about celibacy on 22 pages scattered through the book (see Index, p. 241).

Given our "historicality," we continue to live as male or female (with distinct sexual identity) and as male and female (united in community bearing the "image of God"). If we *boast in* our "historicality," we will fail to await with hope the "redemption of these earthly bodies," in which we now groan (Rom. 8:19-25). If we *deny* our "historicality," we will go with the Gnostics, who could be ascetic, libertine, or indifferent to sexual ethics.

A "(Christian) theology of sex" for Gnostics is an oxymoron. "Do not covet" either course of life in this world, but stay the course that regards canonical creation theology as being one with redemption theology.

Apart from Hiebert's "fertility" criticism of *Homosexuality*, our differing assessment of Gal. 3:28, and interpretation of Barth, I agree with much Hiebert says.

I do not agree that Romans 1 is the only text that speaks against homosexual practices. But I agree that all the sins mentioned in Romans 1 are blotted out through salvation in Christ.

But then I cannot agree with Hiebert's implication that if people

are not idolatrous, the sins have no moral bearing. They do, and they continue to be a plumbline that measures our fidelity in living our salvation. (Here E. P. Sanders distinction between "entrance" and "maintenance" requirements for both Jewish and Pauline understandings is helpful; see *Paul and Palestinian Judaism,* Fortress, 1977.)

I appreciate that Hiebert rightly perceives my plea for inclusion of those homosexually oriented and that generally he values my exegetical contribution. On the matter of whether I or he has in this case reasoned in a Christian manner, I trust God's justice and mercy. Above all, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your (our) hearts, to which indeed you (we) were called in *one body.* And be thankful" (Col. 3:15; emphasis mine).

With these differences and agreements I welcome another opportunity to enjoy in your home, Bruce, hospitable commensality, as I did last fall. Perhaps next it could be in my home.

—*Willard Swartley, Goshen, Indiana, is professor emeritus of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where he also served as dean and director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies. He holds a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary . He is New Testament editor of the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series and has edited or written many books and articles.*

Darfur

You men on the ground
in a circle —
utterly black,
wearing white robes
and turbans and kufis —
how long, only Allah knows,
since you have seen home,
since you have eaten,
since your prayers have been heard,
since the Janjaweed
killed your many sons
and worse —

What pristine agony
amid such squalor —
see how the dead
still seem to breathe
when the ceaseless yellow wind
rustles their shrouds —

You men on the ground
in a circle —
utterly black,
white-whiskered,
what holy word
resides on your lips —
what invocation
waits for priceless breath
to set it drifting into
the dusty cosmos of Sudan —

This battered tent city
remains your turning circle
of wind and sand —

What invocation
does the wind carry this evening
beneath elusive stars —

how long since you looked at them,
ancient spinning circles
from time's austere genesis
in myths —

You men on the ground
in a circle —
your skins, your fortunes
utterly black —
a vague breeze of myrrh
passes among you,
as if to banish
the world's sins from your midst—

How will you escape this place,
these compelling winds,
the cool and merciless gaze
of these primordial lights
in an unrecognizable sky —

The hour to make your exiled peace
has come and will soon depart —

Kneeling beneath heaven,
hands raised, you glimpse
the outskirts of
a city in another province
and hear its songs,
which you sing quietly,
first alone, then together —

This astonishment you feel
may last forever —
rest assured —
longer, in any event,
than this rude and
sublime hunger.

In the Suuqa Karmal

In Minneapolis, Somali Sufis
gather around
noon cafe tables
that seem strangely small
because of their robes
and inhale the winter air
in the Suuqa Karmal.

The dark restaurant
at Cedar and Riverside
looks out on the street across
from the high-rise project where
an unseen mosque
lets out a hundred people
every day after midday prayers.

They mingle in the street
with no mind to the traffic.
Men, whose skin reflects
all the dark intensity of Africa,
all the abiding tides of the sea,
sit and caress ivory and amber beads,
and drink thimbles of dark,
sordid-looking coffee
that wafts half the distance
down the block, even
when the air is frozen,
like now.

Their eyes flicker as they drink,
as the muezzin saunters in,
his green kufi at an odd,
but purposeful inclination.

Just down the street, at a
bus stop, one of their brethren,
one of the oldest of these exiles
from Mogadishu,
was beaten the better part
of the way to death
a month after Sept. 11.

He died without waking in
the Hennepin County hospital
a few days later, his death
blamed by the white doctors
on old age, the natural result
of his skull colliding
with the edge of the sidewalk.

The eyes of the Sufis in
the Suuqa Karmal
focus on some middle distance as
they drink their winter coffee,
their enlightened nerves illumined
with some inner invocation
of heat and caffeine.

Anger
is not supposed to be theirs,
these night travelers
on the backroads of
Allah's compassion,
but their eyes slowly darken
in the light
reflected through the windows
by the snow of this strange place.

Their gazes settle on
the muezzin with his green cap,
as he steps toward their chairs
and says, in English, for everyone:

When peace walks among us, brothers,
we will be perfected by it
as surely as saints and prophets —
May the myrrh of forgiveness
teach us the scent of mercy
even as we are cast into the flames
with our devious sins.

Siege

The sundered families
of Falluja, Allah's
toppled, burning stronghold,
no humiliation
can touch
that hasn't been
tried and succeeded
in one small way
or another —

So what now?

In Baghdad, in Abu Ghraib,
humility remains
the captives' ironic strength.
Nothing
can shatter it — not
rape, not bullets, not
electrical wires
(twisted and knotted)
attached to fingers,
genitals,
shaven heads. Not even
night's silent terror
can alarm anymore.

Not now.

If this were all it took,
none could survive —
this war would be over
for want of victims.

So what then?

Walking across
the Euphrates River
on Highway 10,
behind a pair of
American Marines,
armed and locked and

loaded for “hajis”
and “flip-flops,”
a shaykh from
the Mohammediya Mosque
whispers to his
astonished companion:

I dreamed of Jesus in
Falluja last night,
and in that single moment,
I stopped the war.

—*Robert Rhodes lives in Newton, Kansas, where he is assistant editor of* Mennonite Weekly Review.

On Not Quite Getting It

Bill McKibben

Late last summer, dozens of scientists aboard a trio of icebreakers visited a submerged mountain range in the Arctic Ocean near the North Pole. They drilled core samples 1,400 feet beneath the sea's surface along the Lomonosov Ridge, recovering sediments that revealed clues to the planet's past: a period 49 million years ago, for instance, when for several hundred thousand years "so much fresh warm water apparently topped the Arctic's oxygen-starved salty depths that the polar sea became matted with tiny Azolla ferns, resembling the duckweed that can choke suburban ponds."

What the new cores show, Dr. Henk Brinkhuis, a geobiologist from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, told the *New York Times*, is that "you can get a really strong cascade" of events toward global warming that can then last for eons.

That's interesting—and it accords with a thousand other puzzle pieces that pile up weekly in the scientific journals, all showing that we stand on the brink of changing the planet's climate so abruptly that the world into which we were born will be thrown into wild chaos.

But what was more interesting was the reaction to the news. It wasn't: Oh my gosh, let's get to work on global warming. It was: Let's find out if there's oil down there. If sandstone and clay formed a lid over all those dead ferns, then perhaps they've been cooked into petroleum in the intervening years. "This could be a promising sign for oil and gas prospectivity in the Arctic Ocean," a former exploration geologist for Shell told the *Times*. "Oil prospectors will be very excited, and will be watching the results of analyses with keen interest." Indeed, the *Times* editors chose the headline "Under All That Ice, Maybe Oil."

Which, if you think about it, is an almost classically insane way of thinking. The Arctic is warming rapidly right now because we are burning so much fossil fuel. Arctic ice is 40 percent thinner than it was 40 years ago, allowing, among other things, scientific teams to go drill core sediments. Those core sediments offer additional warnings about the tightrope we're all walking—but the thing that really excites everyone is the chance that there might be more oil there. Which, if we burned it in our cars and factories, would release yet more carbon dioxide, accelerating the warming cycle.

But if it's insane, it's also understandable, and not just because there's money to be made drilling for that oil. We tend to focus on whatever problem is closest at hand, ignoring the huge issues looming just behind. For instance, the *Times* article noted that "with demand for oil skyrocketing and known reserves dwindling, even the subtlest hint" of a new field somewhere "is significant." Indeed, we're about to enter a period when the dwindling supply of oil will be almost constant news.

One analysis after another over the last 18 months—most recently Ken Deffeyes' new book *Beyond Oil: The View from Hubberts Peak*—has made it clear that the limits-to-growth types had it right, at least with respect to oil. World petroleum production has already hit its zenith or will soon do so (Deffeyes predicts Thanksgiving Day 2005, give or take six weeks), and as it slowly declines, gas prices will spike higher and higher.

Now, the smart thing to do would be celebrate that fact, and use it as the impetus to push toward a world that runs on renewable energy. What we should have done two decades ago when we first realized the implications of global warming we should now do because we're running out of oil, and because an economy predicated on cheap energy is in dire danger.

What we're more likely to do is cast about desperately for every last drop of oil, delaying the inevitable as long as we can. So—drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, even though the most fantastically optimistic estimates show that the oil there would delay our reaching the peak of world oil production by about five months (that would be Easter 2006). Or drill at the North Pole, even as the rigs are surrounded by the indisputable open-water evidence of the folly of interfering with the planet's climate.

This is how we evolved, of course. There was great Darwinian pressure to pay attention to the tiger roaring in front of you. You solved one day's problems, and moved on to the next day. It's no wonder that we find it hard to concentrate on something like global warming that plays out over decades, not news cycles.

What we're more likely to do is cast about desperately for every last drop of oil. . . . So. . . . drill at the North Pole, even as the rigs are surrounded by the indisputable open-water evidence of the folly of interfering with the planet's climate.

Consider, for example, how California is reacting to climate change. On the one hand, its government is saying all the right things. Arnold Schwarzenegger has even backed the push for higher gasoline mileage for cars, something his Republican colleagues in Washington have prevented for a generation. The governor's environment secretary, Terri Tamminen, is reportedly at work on a book about ending the use of oil entirely. All of which befits a state that believes it is on a slightly higher evolutionary plane.

But when the rubber literally meets the road, it's another story. As more Californians began to drive fuel-efficient hybrid cars, the people charged with collecting state gas taxes began to notice that they weren't taking in as much money. Revenues from the tax will have declined 8 percent between 1998 and 2005, even as the number of miles traveled by cars on California roads has increased 16 percent. Instead of celebrating that as a small nugget of hope in the dismal global picture (as a sign that California is heading, ever so slightly, in the direction of western Europe), officials in the state's transportation department are viewing the news with great alarm.

Why? Because they may not have the money from the gas tax to repair as many roads. And to them, and doubtless many Californians, that seems like the real problem. Their response? According to the *Los Angeles Times*, it's a proposal to place a box in every car that will record how many miles each vehicle drives and then to tax the owners accordingly, rather than tax them for how much gas they use. In other words, they're talking about removing one of the strong incentives for Californians to behave responsibly—under the new scheme, owners of a Hummer and a Prius who drove an equal number of miles would pay the state the same fee each year for the privilege of using its roads.

This is precisely the type of blind alley that humans drive down when they focus on the wrong issue. Here you have a proposal that solves the lesser of two problems (road repair) by making the larger one (climate change) worse. Not to mention raising truly wild privacy issues—do you want a GPS-connected box in your car that reports your movements to

the government? Anyone giving it 10 minutes' thought could come up with wiser solutions. What about raising the gas tax, for instance, so that revenues went up and the incentive to buy a Hummer was further reduced?

But since that would require selling the idea of a "tax hike" to voters, it's easier to invent a whole Rube Goldberg system of trunk-mounted boxes and GPS satellites and so forth. It's like the astronomers who spent a thousand years trying to repair the impossibilities of the Ptolemaic cosmology—adding epicycles to orbits to explain away the actual observation of how the planets moved—until Copernicus finally stood up and said what was going on.

Where the future of this planet is concerned, we're not quite there yet, not even in the blue states. Take, for instance, the conclusion of an Oregon panel working on the same issue of fuel-tax revenues: "While it is good policy to preserve our environment and our resources, it is not good policy to let transportation revenues decline."

When the day comes that a statement like that is laughed out of the room, you'll know we're finally beginning to evolve.

—Bill McKibben lives with his wife and daughter in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, where he is a Sunday school superintendent of the local Methodist church. He is author of The End of Nature *(Knopf, 1990) and many other books and articles. This article originally appeared in the March/April issue of* Orion *magazine, 187 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230, 888/909-6568, www.oriononline.org ($35/year for 6 issues). A free copy of the magazine can be obtained through Orion's website at www.oriononline.org.*

Imperfect Scraps

Deborah Good

I am learning to be like the Mennonite women in my family who made and make quilts. I don't know how to quilt. But I do make collages from time to time, as a form of therapy. And I write. All three—quilts, collages, and writing—are a bit like life. I bring what I have, which are mostly imperfect scraps and fragments, and I work them together. I make art.

Every last one of us is laced with imperfection—much the way the gas we feed our cars is laced with the sin of war and Arctic drilling. Yet I am learning to love myself unconditionally, personality flaws, chunky thighs, the works.

I like to pretend I am an enlightened woman, resistant to our image-centered culture and media, and I think I have deceived most people into believing me. But really, like many other women in this country, I spend much of my time wishing I was thinner and sexier. I have this image of myself 10 pounds trimmer with smooth, tan skin. I have slimmer thighs and fuller lips. My clothes are trendy and my hair glows blonde in the sun (like it used to when I was 12 and didn't care anyway).

I realize that having any of these would only make me less like myself and more like some hip Euro-chic I've seen in an outdoorsy magazine. And, after won-

dering for a brief moment if this might be an improvement, I decide, for the humpteenth time, that I am okay as I am, and that being me actually has far more to offer—to myself and to the world—than trying to be some magazine model I've never met.

It's amazing how many times self-acceptance has to be discovered again and again. And how much self-criticism I must endure between discoveries.

It's amazing how many times self-acceptance has to be discovered again and again.

I was thinking about the great, radical act of self-acceptance today, as I sat in a waiting room at the National Institute of Health. It was a particularly crazy day in the radiology department, and more people than usual were waiting longer than usual for their CT scans and MRI's. My dad, a wonderful man made gaunt and depressed by disease, was among them. For an hour or so, we read and dozed and looked around at each other in silence.

Slowly, patience began crumbling and the patients, all looking sharp in their blue paper scrubs, began to complain about the long wait. First to each other and then to the staff, who explained that an emergency case had pushed everything back. They were behind, and they were sorry.

Our health, it seems, is among the most fragile—and the most resilient—of all things. I have, at times, believed it was countercultural to proclaim my physical body unimportant. At some level, this is true. As Anne Lamott writes in *Plan B*, "When we get to heaven, we will discover that the appearance of our butts and our skin was 127th on the list of what mattered on this earth."

But at another level, it seems to me that body and spirit are in a big tangled dance together, inseparably connected. It is our bodies, not just our minds and spirits, that determine whether we feel like getting out of bed in the morning, whether we walk or wheel ourselves around, whether we live or die.

As the minutes ticked by in the waiting room, some of the patients continued talking. I began noticing that these people were among the kindest I had met in my lifetime. Granted, they had hints of being frustrated and skeptical—I would be concerned if they weren't—and surely, they must have darker sides that come out in the safety of their own cars and homes. But generally, everyone there was pleasant, genuine, gentle.

And everyone in the room, except me, had cancer.

All of a sudden, my ability to act like physical bodies don't really matter seemed a monstrous privilege—a luxury. Body matters very much to cancer patients. I imagined these blue-gowned men and women doing the same work I was of accepting themselves, while, in the same moment, being at war with their bodies and the tumors that threatened them.

I know that rain falls on the good and the less good alike. But does cancer have to do the same? I think of all the people I am angry with in the world—an ex-sort-of-boyfriend who will go nameless and a number of politicians I've never met—running about cancer-free while all the wonderful people sitting in this room, and my dad who has a huge piece of my heart, are in various stages of fighting and dying from this terrible disease.

(I in no way mean to imply, of course, that people I am angry with *should* come down with cancer. Maybe just a really bad case of the flu.)

The unfairness of it all makes me ache and punch my pillow at night and consider giving up on religion. If I could send God a petition, asking for a change in cancer policy, it would be eloquently written and signed by everyone I know times ten.

I don't know much about God. But sometimes I imagine God is a lake, so that on days like today, when the world feels weighty, and the madness of it all makes me sweat on the inside, I can run to the shore and dunk my head in.

One by one, my waiting room companions are called away for their scans and procedures. Dad returns from his, and we begin weaving through the maze of hallways to the exit. Mom and I walk. Dad rolls, like a royal (and dejected) king on his chariot.

Outside, the sun is shining. Spring has come and I almost melt with my gratitude for it. Dad's life has become a series of waves called chemotherapy, crashing and settling and crashing again. But in between, the sun sets, the sky turns pink, and the moon rises in all its breathtaking beauty. We remember that life is really worth fighting for and crying about.

Meanwhile, 10 students die at a school in Minnesota when a surely broken young man opens fire, later taking his own life. Iraq continues burning—along with the Middle East and Darfur, dark smoke and mournful cries rising. What is health and wholeness amid such destruction and death?

I don't know that I have found it. But I get glimpses of it most when I sit with Dad, doing nothing but being together, being comfort, being in love with ourselves and each other.

There is nothing quite like true self-acceptance, discovering again and again that, all arguments aside, we are okay. And when I truly believe this, the obsession I sometimes direct at myself, wishing I was somehow different, can break open into compassion for others. My arms open. And I find I am no longer alone.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is writing and piecing together part-time work, while spending much of her time in Washington, D.C., with her parents.

The Angry, Self-Righteous Samaritan

Is He Still Good?

Joy Kauffman

The parable Jesus told went a little something like this. . . .

A man was walking down the road and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. A preacher, the kind who tells people he is a Christian, went by, saw the man, and passed on the other side of the road. A U.S. government official went by, saw the man, and passed on the other side of the road.

Then a Christian who doesn't usually tell people he is Christian but has one of those "War is not the answer" signs in his front yard so he assumes everyone should know, comes along. He sees the man but also sees the government official and the Christian preacher up ahead. He thinks to himself, *I can't believe that government official and that preacher just walked by. Those heartless conservatives, how dare they just leave this man here bleeding?*

So the man decides to take the victim to a hospital, since no one else could be bothered. After two hours of hassle during which the patient continues to bleed in the waiting room, the beat-up man is finally admitted. His helper is relieved to find out that since it's an emergency, even though the guy is uninsured, Medicaid rules require the hospital to treat him anyway. So the rescuer leaves, out a few hours but not a dime (except of course his tax dollars, some of which are channeled to pay for the guy's care).

They have a candlelight vigil which involves prayers about the callous indifference of the Christian preacher and chants of "No more years." The rescuer is thrilled.

So that's that. Or is it? *No, that is surely not enough*, he thinks to himself, *I must speak out against the injustice. I must let everyone know. I bear witness to the political powers that be.* The man sends out an e-mail to all his friends about a protest he's organizing at the White House calling on the Bush Administration to stop allowing people to be beaten and citing the government official for walking by.

They have a candlelight vigil which involves prayers about the callous indifference of the Christian preacher and chants of "No more years." The rescuer is thrilled. Fifty people showed. The banners were great, including catchy slogans like "Bush is a Murderer," "Real Eyes Realize Real Lies," "God is not a Republican," and finally "The Moral Majority is neither." There was even a small write-up in the *Post*. While sipping his fair trade, shade-grown coffee, the man thinks contently, *Now that is good.*

Back at the hospital the nurses, their funding provided mostly by Medicaid and Medicare payments, change the dressing on the wounds and the hospital chaplain, one of those types that tell people they are a Christian, visits the man daily for prayer. And the healing is progressive.

—Joy Kauffman, Hyattsville, Maryland, is currently a full-time mom to two-and-a-half-year-old Anya as well as a potter, wife, and board member of a D.C. community health center. During the 10 years prior to becoming a mother, she worked with social justice and public health issues focused on underserved people internationally in Romania, Brazil, and Nicaragua; and domestically at several Washington D.C.-based not-for-profits as well as with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services..

On the Death of a Friend

It was said you were the Queen of your family. Before you
died, you peeled off that last layer of clothing to stand
naked . . . vulnerable . . . before those you loved.
Unaccustomed to nakedness, unable to see beauty in that
form, they turned away, preferring to see you
as you had always been. Properly clothed.

I wanted to shout, "She wears no clothes! She has removed
her clothes! See her beauty!" But my voice was silent and the
words became tears spilling down my cheeks, unheard.

An elephant came to church the day we gathered
to remember you. I first glimpsed her standing with your
family as I waited in the viewing line. In the casket, you
appeared a shadow of the daughter and sister your family knew
and loved. But my eyes were drawn to the elephant. She was
holding a portrait of you, as you stood, unclothed, radiant in
truth and beauty. The picture glowed, inviting everyone to
a new way of seeing.

The elephant accompanied you into the sanctuary, looming
large atop the closed casket. She sat quietly, but I couldn't take
my eyes off her. She overpowered everything—the Scripture,
the words of comfort, the eulogies. Only when your friend
sang a magnificent rendition of "It is well with my soul" did
the elephant seem to fade. But she was there,
all day, insistently present.

And for those who had eyes to see, and ears to hear, the beauty
of your life echoed throughout the sound of the silence.

—*Marilyn Kennel, Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, enjoys observing, reflecting, and writing about the moments of her days. Currently, she absorbs the sights, sounds, and smells of farm life working full-time as an embryo transfer technician in her husband's veterinary practice.*

The Tailgating Preacher and Other Confessionary Tales

Michael A. King

Confession is good for the soul, the saying goes. There is much that could be pondered about the theological, biblical, or psychological complexities of confession, but here I want to do a much simpler thing: just tell how good to the soul some of the lighter forms of confession can feel.

My experience of this unfolded one evening at a church meal. A number of us sitting at the same table started telling stories of the unacceptable things we had done at various points in our lives.

My worst story was of the day sometime in recent years when, in a rush to get to a meeting at night, I tailed somebody mercilessly through turn after turn on the way to church. That already wasn't good. But it got worse. At the very last turn, the driver I was tailing turned into the church parking lot. I was so ashamed I drove around the block. To this day I don't know what congregant—among those who called me to minister better than that—I sinned against.

Meanwhile other stories from other tellers included stealing hot chocolate from a church camp

and getting caught by a stern camp director.

Or how one member when younger was along with another worker helping his father do roofing. The other worker idly pondered whether it would hurt to fall two stories down to the dumpster.

As quickly as he said it he fell down into the dumpster.

Our church member gazed down at the errant worker. Just like that *he* fell down into the dumpster.

He observed to his coworker, "I guess it did hurt."

Up on the roof, as the chaos unfolded below, his father was hollering for his helpers.

Inspired by these stories, yet one more member told of a Christian from another congregation who one day in a convenience store observed a woman barely able to contain her impatience while waiting in a coffee line. She had on a WWJD—meaning what would Jesus do—bracelet. The Christian telling the story (we'll leave to God the Christianity of our WWJD friend) took on nearly the role of God by confronting the errant one with the need for confession, though with the mercy laughter always includes. She leaned over to the impatient one and politely observed, "I think he'd have hot chocolate."

By the end of the meal, we were laughing so hard we were crying. And amid the laughter there was deep healing.

Why? Because as that group of us, committed Christians, laughed at each other's foibles, we were also working implicitly on that age-old human project of figuring out what is right and wrong and what needs to be done when we don't stay on the right side of the line.

What made the laughter so deep was not only that the stories were funny but also that we could feel within the act of telling them the healing lightness that comes when instead of fleeing our misbehaviors we together look at them.

Here the sins were smaller ones, so they only started us on a path we would have to travel more fully to work through the larger sins, but sometimes we learn from the small about the big. Even if in tiny ways, what we were doing was confessing to each other.

And what made the laughter so deep was not only that the stories were funny but also that we could feel within the act of telling them the healing lightness that comes when instead of fleeing our misbehaviors we together look at them and, by the very act of telling them to each other, begin to say we know we should live differently from now on.

—Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is pastor, Spring Mount (Pa.) Mennonite Church, and editor, DreamSeeker Magazine. *He aims no longer to tailgate. (Portions of this column are adapted from an article that first appeared in* Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, *Fall 2002, pp. 89-94.)*

"Crash"

A Review

David Greiser

By now we know that, biologically speaking, there is essentially no such thing as "race." But for a concept lacking in reality, "race" continues to be a powerful definer of human motives and actions.

"Crash" is a film that expertly and uncomfortably canvasses many of the painful nuances of the racial divide in America. Written and directed by Paul Haggis, the screenwriter of 2004's Oscar-winning boxing movie "Million Dollar Baby," "Crash" is a writer's movie, with an excellent ensemble cast headed by Don Cheadle ("Hotel Rwanda," "Ocean's Eleven" and "Ocean's Twelve") and Matt Dillon.

The chaotic story unfolds in a nonlinear fashion, with a narrative arc that doubles back on itself from end to beginning to end, framed by a series of car crashes that become parables in the story.

The real revelations in the script, however, belong to its dialogue. Haggis offers us characters that say what they think and whose words reveal complex human beings who are simultaneously capable of smug prejudice and selfless heroism. There are no stereotypical characters here; because of that, we become absorbed in the story, unsure of where it might veer next.

"Crash" is less a story than a series of independent vignettes, several of which turn out to be unexpectedly interlocked. It is peopled by whites, blacks (both rich and poor), Latinos, Koreans, Iranians, cops, and thugs.

Each character is in some way defined by racism, and all eventually become victims of some expression of prejudice. There is a pair of black philosopher-carjackers (played by Larenz Tate and Ludacris) who trawl Los Angeles by night, robbing the rich a la Robin Hood. One of their victims, the paranoid wife of the Los Angeles D.A. (Sandra Bullock in an uncharacteristically unlikable role), has the house locks changed, then frets that the Latino locksmith and his "homies" will return and burglarize her later.

A racist white cop (Matt Dillon) and his partner (played by Ryan Philippe) stop an SUV driven by a black TV director and his light-skinned wife. In the course of the arrest, Dillon's character gropes the woman while her husband is forced to watch helplessly. Ironically, both cops must later become heroically involved in the lives of the couple.

A black cop (Don Cheadle) has an affair with his Latina partner (Jennifer Esposito) but can never remember which country she's from. An Iranian store owner (played by Shaun Toub) buys a gun for protection because his neighbors believe he is an Arab terrorist (he is, in fact, Persian, not Arab). And so it goes.

Haggis explores the racial encounters unflinchingly, which can make for some uncomfortable viewing. But his characters are never one-dimensional, nor are the issues they portray. Instead, many of the characters express compassionate natures and racist rage simultaneously, even as viewers may well experience the same mixture within themselves as they become involved in the film.

There is an undeniably spiritual element in this film; an element of predestination, and an even larger intimation, at points, of divine intervention.

Don Cheadle's character walks a tightrope between enforcing the law and genuinely seeking out justice. While he is a good cop, he is a failure at home as a brother and a son. Matt Dillon's Officer Ryan wields brutal power over the African-Americans he arrests, but that power is exchanged for an anguished helplessness as he cares for his sick father at home, and pleads with the black HMO representative who is cutting off his coverage. Bullock's character berates her Latina maid for her perpetual tardiness, only to admit to her later, "You are the only friend I have."

I suppose some viewers might find parts of "Crash" to be emotionally manipulative, in that Haggis brings together the parts of his story in some unlikely and random ways. I prefer to think of this technique as parabolic storytelling, making a strong point even while retaining the feel of real life.

There is an undeniably spiritual element in this film; an element of predestination, and an even larger intimation, at points, of divine intervention. Perhaps Haggis is telling us that the healing of our racial divisions requires intervention from beyond. Certainly he is saying that, in a world where everything seems to be black and white, nothing finally is.

—David Greiser left a multicultural pastorate in Philadelphia in 1993. He presently serves as pastor of the nearly all white Souderton Mennonite Church, and teaches preaching to mostly African-American classes at Palmer Theological Seminary (formerly Eastern Baptist) in Philadelphia.

A Dad Is a Dad Is a Dad?

The farmer is a cheery sort.
He likes to talk
a lot
and the laughter that punctuates his words
grates after awhile.

"Stay in the barn," he tells his young son.
"I want to go out."
"No."
"Why?"
"Because."
"But why?"
"Because I said so and that's reason enough."

I swallow hard.
Is it '55 or '05?
Some things seem never to change
This dad, my dad, all dads?

—Marilyn Kennel

Gabe's Story

Noël R. King

Gabe knew that he had an important story to tell, but he hadn't been able to figure it out yet. He'd get this tremendous compulsion to start telling it to his buddy, Danny, for instance, but then end up having to flounder and backtrack, feeling like an utter fool, when the words would not keep coming out of his mouth no matter how hard he tried.

The farthest he had been able to get so far was this puzzling phrase: "The postmark was faded and blurred." He had no idea what a postmark had to do with his story or why it was the only part of his story he was able to voice. The rest of the story—he could feel it in there, sort of midway between his chest and throat—was like a big burp that just wouldn't come out, no matter how fervently he tried to encourage it to do so.

It would have been one thing if he could have just resigned himself to never getting the story out and had been able to forget the whole matter. Unfortunately, however, it poked and prodded at him, never allowing him to simply relax into whatever he was doing at the moment. It never let him rest, never let him get comfortable.

He tried all the usual—banging on his back with an encyclopedia (P–R), running up and down the

flight of stairs to his apartment, drinking heavily carbonated sodas, and writing down all his thoughts in a journal. He swore; he stomped; he begged; he cried; he ate chocolate chip cookies. Still the lump of unspoken words remained unspoken. In fact, it got even worse as the consonants came loose and started poking into his lungs and ribs. He could tell the story was getting longer and filling up more and more space inside his body.

It turns out that *Gabe* was the story he had been trying so hard to tell.

Soon he was starting to wheeze a bit as he breathed. His thumb hurt from writing so much in his journal. He began fearing seriously for his life as the story overtook him from the inside out.

Gabe was a practical person, however, and he decided to simply keep living as best he could despite this tremendous inner pressure, although he still allowed himself a half-hour tantrum every evening and generous outbursts of despair as needed throughout each day.

Then something else happened, something even more alarming and disorienting, at least from Gabe's point of view: He began blurting out disconcertingly strange statements and responses to people, unbidden. Sometimes it was to the customer service people at his bank. Sometimes it was in response to his mother when he spoke to her on the phone. Sometimes it was in staff meetings at work or while he was on the treadmill at the gym and somebody said, "Excuse me" when accidentally brushing his arm with a towel.

The blurt was always fascinating, always interesting, always somehow germane to the situation at hand, but never, ever something Gabe would have dreamed of saying of his own volition (whatever *that* was, in this case).

Often, in these blurts, he would promise to do things or state definite preferences for causes of action he didn't even know existed. Astonished to hear such things coming out of his mouth, he nonetheless had the courage and sense to actually listen to what he was saying. In doing so, he was amazed to find that he was delighted by what he heard himself pronounce and promise, and he decided on a lark to actually follow through on his declarations.

At this point you know the rest of the story, even if you think you don't, because it turns out that *Gabe* was the story he had been trying so hard to tell. Finally, when he let the story tell itself, his whole life fell into place. Not only that, the big blob in his throat and chest gradually melted away, except for a stray *K* or *N* that he occasionally coughed up for a few months more thereafter. This now only amused him.

And that, my friends, is the story of Gabe, although I am sure he would say it is not really a story until it ends.

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Reston, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including stories like Gabe's.

The Bald-Headed Men and the Comb

A Review of The Reformation *and of* A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology

Daniel Hertzler

The Reformation by Diarmaid MacCulloch. Viking, 2004. 683 pp.

A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology by Thomas N. Finger. InterVarsity, 2004. 566 pp.

Although I doubt that the authors of these two blockbuster books are acquainted, I find them complementing each other. The former author provides extensive documentation for the context in which Anabaptism arose and struggled to survive. The latter combs through Anabaptist writings for theological material to construct his own Anabaptist theology. He offers this for discussion in ecumenical contexts.

Although MacCulloch's major attention and space are given to the magisterial Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, he is quite aware of the Anabaptists. For example, he quotes from Conrad Grebel's letter to Thomas Muntzer in which he held that "'True believing Christians are sheep among wolves'," which, as MacCulloch observes, "was a de-

nial of the concept of Christendom, the alliance with worldly power that had sustained the Medieval Church and that was now beginning to sustain the magisterial Reformation" (164-165).

Anabaptists and Mennonites turn up regularly throughout the tome as counterpoint to the "Christendom" the Reformers from Luther to Zwingli, Calvin, and others could not bring themselves to renounce. The foreground issue was infant versus adult baptism. None of those three could find infant baptism in the Bible, but they felt constrained to perpetuate it. "God's Law laid out in Scripture . . . gave [Zwingli] good reason to justify infant baptism against Anabaptists by analogy with Israelite circumcision, the seal of the covenant" (173).

Anabaptists and Mennonites turn up regularly throughout the tome as counterpoint to . . . "Christendom" . . . .

The background issue was a question of what sort of church there should be. Calvin held that "because Israel had been a mixed church, so was the new Testament Church of Christ. The Anabaptists were mistaken" (237).

Some of the Anabaptist radicals challenged the historic Christian creeds, believing "that Constantine's alliance with the church had represented a wrong turn. . . . The more historically aware of them felt that theology decided in this era was tainted. They preferred the pre-conciliar theological genius Origen to Augustine" (180). Others "said that the idea of the Trinity was a Nicene (and therefore tainted) doctrine not seen in the Bible" (181).

Such radical ideas were not acceptable in a society in which the "alliance of magistrate and magisterial reformer rapidly hardened after 1525" (161). MacCulloch's survey covers some 200 years from 1490 to 1700. It was two centuries of mayhem and bloodshed which more or less culminated in the major convulsions of the Thirty Years War from 1618 to 1648. Some consider that as many as 40 percent of the inhabitants of Germany were destroyed (469).

After 200 years, the geography of Europe was roughly as follows. The Scandinavian countries were principally Protestant, Southern and Eastern Europe were mainly Catholic, and Germany was divided. The British islands had their own distinctive Reformation, bloody in England, mainly peaceable in Scotland, and with Ireland divided.

North American Christians should not overlook the significance of Independents such as William Penn. In Pennsylvania he made a place not only for English Quakers, but also for other English Protestants, Scotch Presbyterians "and the descendants of radical Reformation groups of mainland Europe, like Anabaptists and Moravian Brethren." MacCulloch observes that Pennsylvania was the first of the colonies to devise the denominational pattern of religious expression common in the United

States today (525). He finds also that, whereas in Europe a majority shows no interest in formal religion, Protestantism in America is "pervasive and exuberantly assertive" (527).

This volume is enriched with more details than can be comprehended even in multiple readings. Benjamin Schwartz in *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec. 2004) included this book as one of seven "Books of the Year" in 2004, books "from which you should be able to derive pleasure and profit a decade hence."

Hans Hillerbrand, a Reformation scholar, wrote in *Christian Century* (Feb. 8, 2005) that this is "the most readable and competent history of the actual Reformation period available." But he criticizes the author's generalizations in the latter part of the book. If we have the fortitude we can inform ourselves regarding a multitude of details about a period of history which has had a significant impact on our lives today.

Even so, MacCulloch proposes that the lack of Christian activity in Europe today suggests "a story of two bald headed men fighting over a comb; an ultimately futile struggle over issues that now seem trivial or irrelevant" (652). Yet he observes that it is "possible to argue that the most significant contribution of the two Reformation centuries to Christianity was the theory and practice of toleration" although it can be suggested that "the contribution was inadvertent and reluctant" (652).

In the end MacCulloch returns to the Anabaptists, the "radical thinkers and preachers [who] represented possible future identities for Latin Christianity. . . . A modern Anglican—or even a modern Roman Catholic—is likely to be more like a sixteenth-century Anabaptist in belief than he or she resembles a sixteenth-century member of the Church of England" (682).

Thomas Finger offers Anabaptist theology as a basis for discussion and ecumenical conversation.

Without giving evidence of being aware of MacCulloch's work, Thomas Finger offers Anabaptist theology as a basis for discussion and ecumenical conversation. In what must be a *tour de force* if I understand that expression, Finger has done three things: 1) he has combed through Anabaptist writings to extract theological topics; 2) he has compared these perspectives with the work of selected contemporary writings in the Anabaptist tradition and critiqued these from his own perspective based on Scripture and the historic Christian creeds; 3) he offers this as a formula for use in ecumenical discussions.

Finger has already published two volumes of *Christian Theology*: Volume I (Herald Press, 1987) and Volume II (1989). So he is not entering a new field. But what he has set out to do seems distinctive. He proposes that "in today's culture which prizes particularity yet where many tendencies press swiftly toward globality, an unlikely, very particular communion, the Anabaptists, can aid theology in addressing both dimensions" (12). Well, MacCulloch, here we are.

After a brief review of "modernity" and "postmodernity" to clarify the context in which he writes, he provides a brief survey of Anabaptist history followed by a sampling of current theological writings in the Anabaptist tradition, noting particularly the points of reference.

He finds that they begin with a variety of assumptions: Evangelical (J. C. Wenger, Ronald Sider); "rooted in biblical narrative" (John Howard Yoder, J. Denney Weaver, Norman Kraus, James McClendon). "Other Anabaptist theologians, however, are beginning not so directly from Scripture but within some broader perspective." Here he finds "Christian tradition (James Reimer), methodological considerations (Gordon Kaufman), social considerations (Duane Friesen), and science (Nancey Murphy with George Ellis). Finally, I will examine postmodern issues, mostly through briefer writings on (intra) textuality, Christ and culture, contemporary construction and desire" (57).

Finger then provides his own theological formula, which he uses to evaluate both the historic and contemporary Anabaptist writings. He describes his formula as "The coming of the new creation in three inseparable dimensions—personal, communal and missional." Although he indicates he does not intend to treat this formula as "Anabaptism's essence," he considers it more viable than "discipleship" or "kingdom" (106). He gives one chapter to discussion of each of these three dimensions, drawing on both the historic and the contemporary Anabaptist writers.

He concludes the third of these chapters on the missional dimension with reference to "the scandal of particularity," the perception that God chose Israel, then Jesus, and that "God's particular vehicles are now churches, aptly called eschatological sacraments" (322). He proposes that Anabaptism "can draw a very sharp contrast between the church and the 'world,' yet insist that Jesus' Lordship, including his way in many specifics, is for everyone" (323).

Chapter 8 on Christology is crucial in Finger's strategy, since some historic as well as some current Anabaptist writers have not been impressed by the definitions found in the historic Christian creeds. But Finger, drawing support from John Howard Yoder, recommends "that Anabaptists use the creeds as point of contact with many evangelicals and ecumenicals." Further, he finds that "the creeds compatible, at the least, with the Anabaptist theme of Christ's kenotic Lordship" (418).

In chapter 9 Finger is inclined to find Anabaptism's view on human nature in Scripture, peasant ideals, and medieval mysticism. He concludes that Anabaptists resisted Augustine's inclination to ascribe all choice to God and little to humankind. This view seemed to "sanction the status quo and imply that Christian activity must accord with it." Anabaptists called for radical change in behavior and Finger perceives they must have

assumed "some capacity for what people experience as genuine choice" (511).

In the end, says Finger, "I consider my theology one among other valid contemporary Anabaptist approaches" (562) although he has critiqued most of them from his position with Scripture and the creeds. But in the final word he acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the world in which we live. "A theology shaped by this paradox can be deeply concerned about worldwide processes like mission but still prioritize radical transformation in local settings" (566).

What do we do with Finger's book? Maybe, like *The Reformation*, take it down once in a while and ponder its implications. Finger has taken a bold step. He opens himself not only to Anabaptist historians and other theologians but also to the group of current Anabaptist-related writers. What will they be thinking and saying about the book?

At the least he reminds us that if our heritage is worth practicing it is also worth sharing. Ecumenical relations in my hometown are basically cordial, although not all churches participate. Evidently some prefer the scandal of particularity. Recently a Catholic man died whose daughter was a member of our local Mennonite congregation. The funeral mass was held in the Catholic Church and the funeral meal in the Mennonite meetinghouse. This is Pennsylvania, after all. Perhaps the spirit of William Penn still pervades.

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, a longtime editor and writer, contributes a monthly column to the* Daily Courier *(Connellsville, Pa.).*

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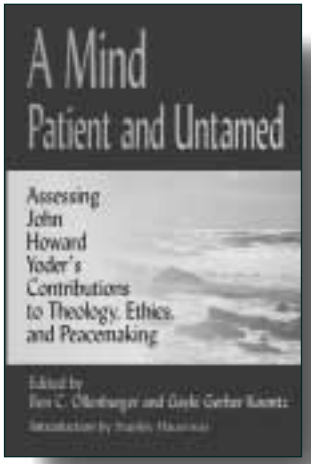

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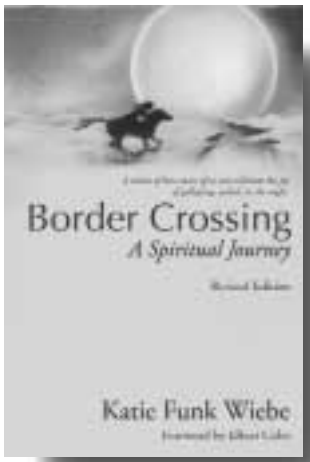

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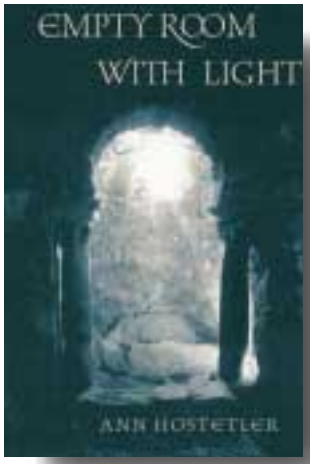

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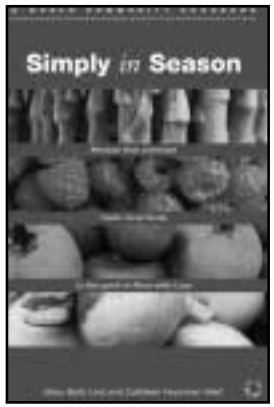

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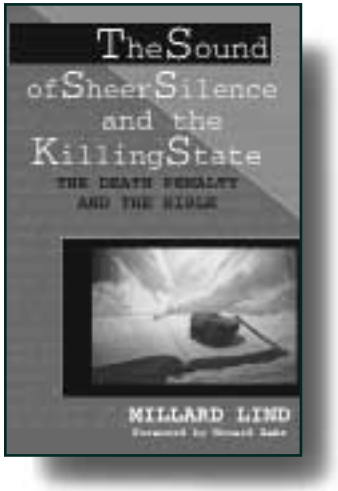

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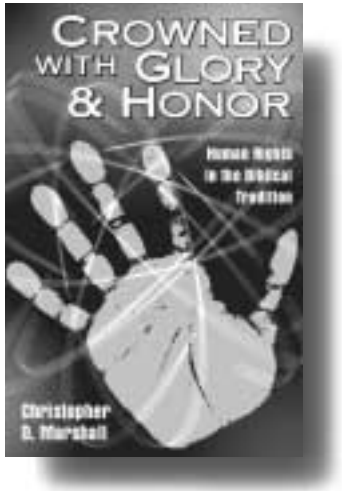

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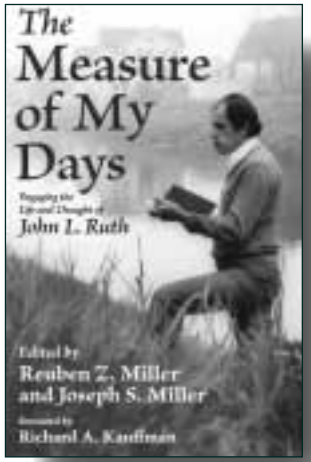

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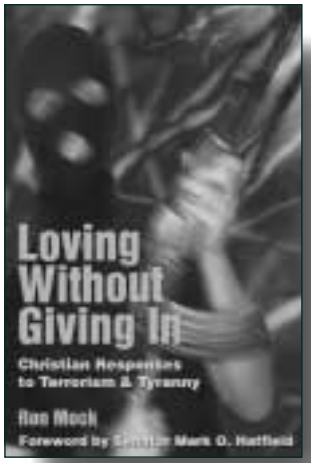

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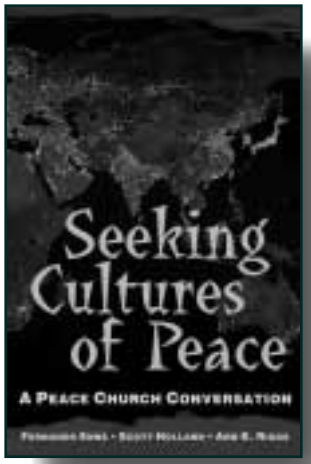

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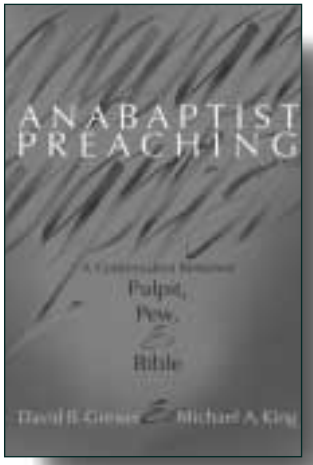

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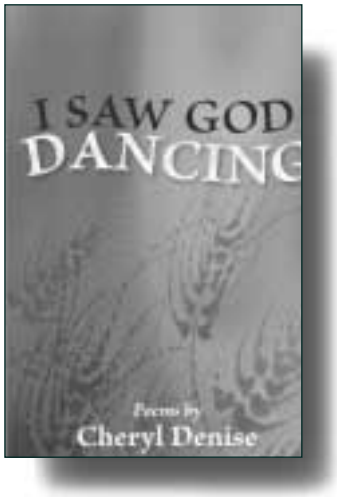

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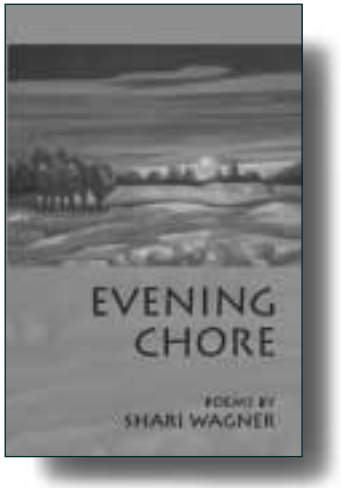

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This Canon-cropped wall
immortalizes a moment shared zooms,
regenerates summers
splashed on Wood Neck Beach.
Clam digging fingers rake sand
bent knees kiss tide pool
before red-tide warnings surface.

Rinse shells several times, sand
sticks to swim-suited cracks and feet.
Pry clams open with sturdy knife:

add quartered, peeled potatoes
in an eight-quart kettle,
onions, celery, carrots with salt,
milk and flour
pepper and all day chowder,
chop fresh parsley, add the garlic
and creamed butter
on soft, Portuguese bread
roasted with white wine.

Snap this picture, remember it well
life blessed as a codder half-baked on a shell.

—*A former art professor remarked that the sketchbooks of Clarissa Jakobsons, Aurora, Ohio, looked more like poetry than paintings, an observation that accurately predicted her midlife direction. Finally, years of teaching and parenting have led Clarissa back to poetry classes at Kent State University and reading at Shakespeare and Company, in Paris. A reader throughout northern Ohio and poetry editor of the* Arsenic Lobster*, she won first place in the Akron Art Museum 2005 New Word Competition. This summer she looks forward to kicking sandcastles with Gail Mazur and painting dunes with Bert Yarborough at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center.*