

Christian Odyssey



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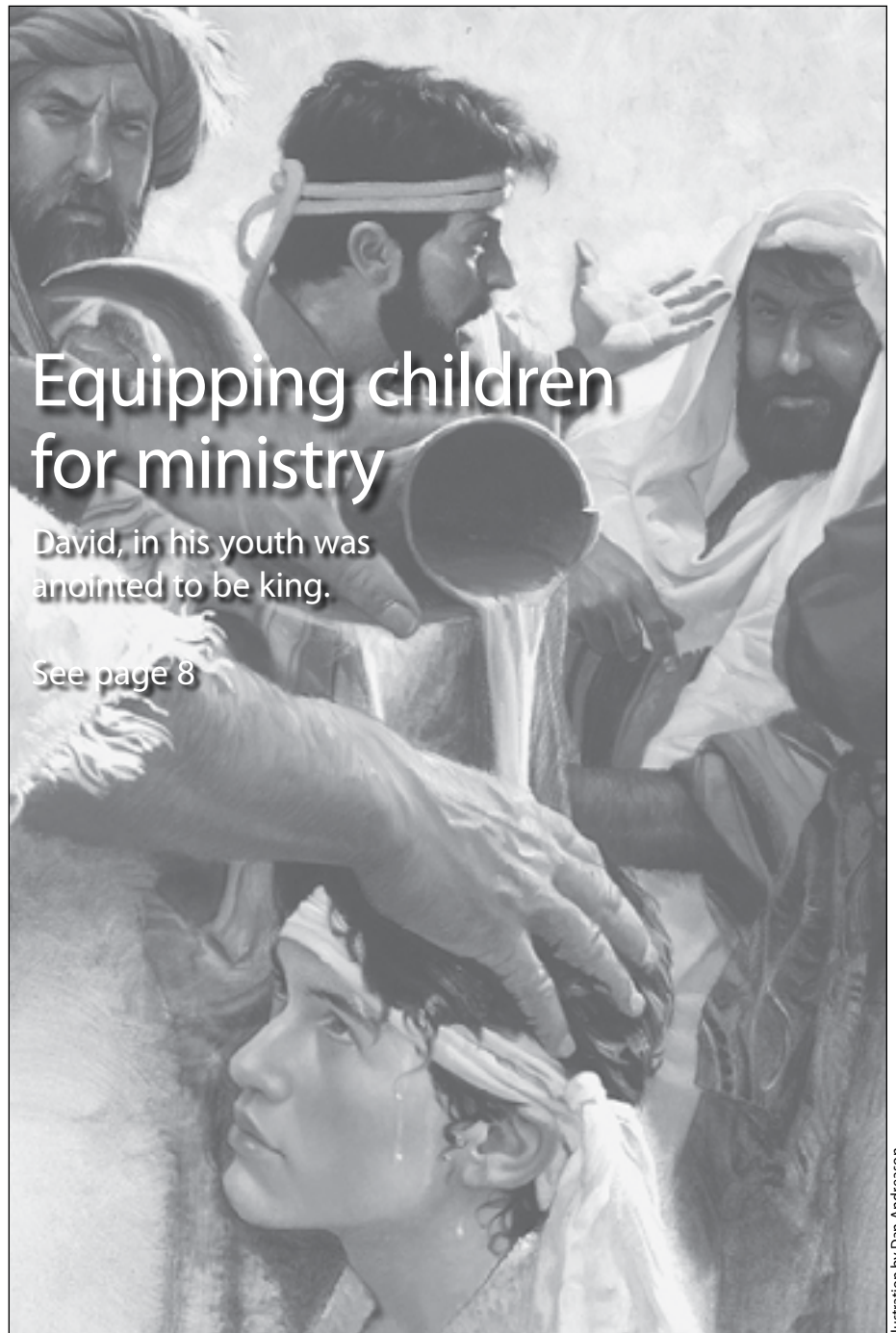


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Christian
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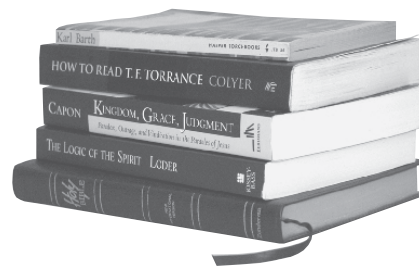
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Theology

what difference does it make?



By Terry Akers and Mike Feazell

"Don't talk to me about theology. Just teach me the Bible."

To the average Christian, theology might sound like something hopelessly complicated, frustratingly confusing and thoroughly irrelevant. Anybody can read the Bible. So why do we need head-in-the-clouds theologians with their long sentences and fancy terms?

Faith seeking understanding

Theology has been called "faith seeking understanding." In other words, as Christians we trust God, but God has made us to want to understand who we are trusting and why we trust him. That's where theology comes in. The word theology comes from a combination of two Greek words, *theos*, meaning God, and *logia*, meaning knowledge or study—study of God.

When properly used, theology can serve the church by combating heresies, or false teachings. That is because most heresies come from wrong understandings of who God is, understandings that don't square with the way God has revealed himself in the Bible. The church's proclamation of the gospel, of course, needs to rest on the firm foundation of God's own revelation of himself.

Revelation

Knowledge about God is not something that we humans can just come up with on our own by thinking it out. The only way we can know anything true about God is to listen to what God tells us about himself. The main way God has chosen to reveal himself

to us is through the Bible, a collection of inspired writings compiled over many, many centuries under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. But even diligent study of the Bible cannot convey to us right understanding of who God is—we need more than mere study—we need the Holy Spirit to make our minds able to understand what God reveals in the Bible about himself. The bottom line is that true knowledge of God comes only from God, not by any amount of human study or reasoning.

The church has an ongoing responsibility to critically examine its beliefs and practices in the light of God's revelation. Theology is the Christian faith community's continuous quest for truth as it humbly seeks God's wisdom and follows the Holy Spirit's lead into all truth. Until Christ returns in glory, the church cannot assume that it has reached its goal.

That is why theology should never become a mere restatement of the church's creeds and doctrines, but should rather be a never-ending process of critical self-examination.

It is only as we stand in the divine Light of God's mystery that we find true knowledge of God.

Paul called that divine mystery "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), the mystery that through Christ it pleased God "to reconcile to himself all

things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (verse 20).

The Christian church's proclamation and practice are always in need of examination and fine-tuning, sometimes even major reform, as it continues to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dynamic theology

The word dynamic is a good word to describe this constant effort of the Christian church to look at itself and the world in the light of God's self-revelation and then to let the Holy Spirit conform it accordingly to be a people who reflect and proclaim God as God truly is.

We see this dynamic quality in theology throughout church history. The apostles reinterpreted the Scriptures when they proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

God's new act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ brought new light to the Bible, light that the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of the apostles to see.

In the fourth century, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, used descriptive words in the creeds that were not in the Bible in order to help gentiles understand the meaning of the biblical revelation of God. In the 16th century, John Calvin and Martin Luther contended for

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To the average Christian, theology might sound like something hopelessly complicated, frustratingly confusing and thoroughly irrelevant.

Theology

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the renewal of the church in light of the demand of the biblical truth that salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the 1800s, John McLeod Campbell attempted to broaden the



Karl Barth

Church of Scotland's narrow view on the nature of Jesus' atonement for humanity and was thrown out for his efforts. In modern times, no one has been more effective in calling the church to a dynamic theology rooted in active faith than Karl Barth, who "gave the Bible back to Europe" after liberal Protestant theology had nearly swallowed up the church by embracing Enlightenment humanism and the natural theology of the German church.

Listening to God

Whenever the church fails to hear the voice of God and instead gives in to its own assumptions and presuppositions, it becomes weak and ineffective. It loses relevance in the eyes of those

it is trying to reach with the gospel message.

The same is true of any part of the Body of Christ when it wraps itself up in its own preconceived ideas and traditions. It becomes bogged down, stuck or static, the opposite of dynamic, and loses its effectiveness in spreading the gospel.

When that happens, the church begins to fragment, or break up, Christians become alienated from one another, and Jesus' command that we love one another fades into the background.

Then gospel proclamation becomes merely a set of words, a proposition that people merely agree with. The power behind it to offer healing to sinful minds loses its force. Relationships become external, merely surface relationships that miss the deep union and communion with Jesus and one another where genuine healing, peace and joy become real possibilities.

Static religion is a barrier that can prevent believers from becoming the real people God intends them to be in Jesus Christ.

'Double predestination'

The doctrine of election or double predestination has long been a distinctive, or identifying doctrine, in the Reformed theological tradition (the tradition that stands in the shadow of John Calvin). This doctrine has frequently been misunderstood, distorted and the cause of

endless controversy and distress.

Calvin himself struggled with this issue, and his teaching on it has been interpreted by many as saying, "From eternity God has decreed some to salvation and others to damnation."

This interpretation of the doctrine of election is usually described as hyper-Calvinistic. It fosters a fatalistic view of God as an arbitrary tyrant and an enemy of human freedom.

Such an approach to the doctrine makes it anything but good news as proclaimed in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The biblical witness describes the electing grace of God as astonishing, but not dreadful! God, who

loves in freedom, offers his grace freely to all who will receive it.

Karl Barth

In correcting this hyper-Calvinism, the preeminent Reformed theologian of the modern church, Karl Barth, recast the Reformed doctrine of election by centering rejection and election in Jesus Christ.

He carefully laid out the full biblical doctrine of election in Volume II of his Church Dogmatics in a way that is consistent with the whole of God's revelation.

Barth forcefully demonstrated that within a Trinitarian context, the doctrine of election has one central purpose: it declares that God's works in creation, reconciliation and redemption are fully realized in the free grace of God made known in Jesus Christ.

It affirms that the triune God who lives eternally in loving communion graciously wills to include others in that communion. The

The Creator Redeemer deeply desires a relationship with his creation. And relationships by nature are dynamic, not static. Relationships penetrate the abyss of our existence and turn it into real life.

Static religion is a barrier that can prevent believers from becoming the real people God intends them to be in Jesus Christ.

Creator Redeemer deeply desires a relationship with his creation. And relationships by nature are dynamic, not static. Relationships penetrate the abyss of our existence and turn it into real life.

In the Dogmatics, where Barth rethought the doctrine of election in a Trinitarian, Creator Redeemer context, he called it "the sum of the gospel." In Christ God elected all of humanity in covenant partnership to share in his life of communion by freely and graciously choosing to be God for humanity.

Jesus Christ is both the Elected and the Rejected for our sakes, and individual election and rejection can be understood as real only in him.

In other words, the Son of God is the Elect on our behalf. As the universal elected man, his vicarious, or substitutionary, election is at the same time both to the condemnation of death (the cross) in our place and to eternal life (the resurrection) in our place. This atoning and reconciling work of Jesus Christ in the incarnation was complete in the redeeming of fallen humanity.

We must therefore say yes to God's yes for us in Christ Jesus and embrace and begin to live in the joy and light of what he has already secured for us—union, communion and participation with him in a new creation.

New creation

In his important contribution to the doctrine of election, Barth writes: "For in God's union with this one man, Jesus Christ, he has shown his love to all and his solidarity with all. In this One he has taken upon himself the sin and guilt of all, and therefore rescued them all by higher right from the judgment

which they had rightly incurred, so that he is really the true consolation of all."

Everything changed at the cross. The entire creation, whether it knows it or not, has been, is being and will be redeemed, transformed and made new in Jesus Christ. We are becoming a new creation in him.

Thomas F. Torrance, premier student and interpreter of Karl Barth, served as editor when Barth's Church Dogmatics was translated into English. Torrance believed that Volume II was some of the finest theology ever written. He agreed with Barth that all of humanity has been redeemed and elected in Christ.

Professor Torrance, in his book *The Mediation of Christ* lays out the biblical revelation that Jesus is not only our atoning reconciler through his vicarious life, death and resurrection, but serves as our perfect response to God's grace.

Jesus took our fallenness and judgment on himself, assuming sin, death and evil in order to redeem the creation at all levels and transform everything that stood against us into a new creation. We have been freed from our depraved and rebellious natures for an internal relationship with the One who both justifies and sanctifies us.

Torrance goes on to explain that "the unassumed is the unhealed." What Christ has not taken upon himself has not been saved. Jesus

took our alienated mind on himself, becoming what we are in order to reconcile us to God. He thereby cleansed, healed and sanc-

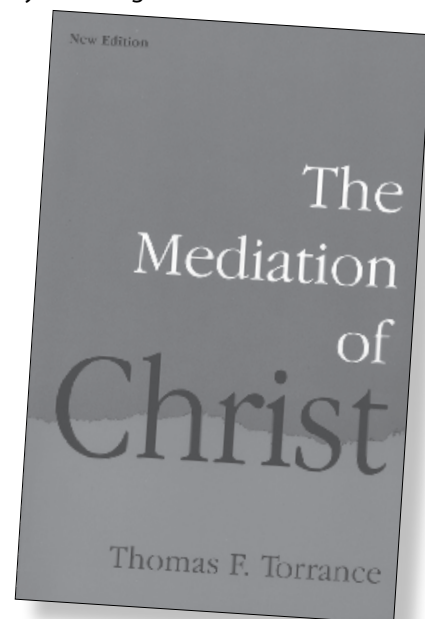
tified sinful humanity in the depths of its being in his vicarious loving act of incarnation for us.

Instead of sinning like all other human beings, he condemned sin in our flesh by living a life of perfect holiness within our flesh, and through his obedient Sonship he converted our hostile and disobedient humanity into a true, loving relationship with the Father.

In making himself one of us in Jesus Christ, the triune God became what we are in order to redeem us and reconcile us to his love. By making our sinful nature his

The entire creation, whether it knows it or not, has been, is being and will be redeemed, transformed and made new in Jesus Christ.

Embrace and begin to live in the joy and light of what he has already secured for us—union, communion and participation with him in a new creation.



own and healing it, Jesus Christ became the Mediator between God and a fallen humanity.

Our election in the one man Jesus Christ fulfills God's purpose for the creation and defines God as
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the God who loves in freedom. Torrance explains that “all of grace” does not mean “nothing of humanity,” but all of grace means all of humanity. That is, we cannot hold onto even one percent of ourselves.

By grace through faith, we participate in God’s love for the creation in a relational way that was not possible before. That means that we love others as God loves us because by grace Jesus Christ is in us and we are in him.

This can happen only within the miracle of a new creation. God’s revelation to humanity comes from the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and a redeemed humanity now responds by faith in the Spirit through the Son to the Father.

We have been called to holiness in Christ. We enjoy freedom in him from the sin, death, evil, misery and judgment that stood against us. We reciprocate, or return, God’s love for us through thanksgiving, worship and service in the community of faith.

In all his healing and saving relations with us, Jesus Christ is engaged in personalizing and humanizing us—that is, in making us real people in him. In all our relations with him, he makes us more truly and fully human in our personal response of faith. This takes place in us through the creative power of the Holy Spirit as he unites us to the perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of grace really does mean all

of humanity. The grace of Jesus Christ who was crucified and resurrected for us does not depreciate the humanity he came to save. God’s unconditional grace brings into the light all that we are and do.

Even in our repenting and believing we cannot rely on our own response, but in faith we rely only on the response that Christ has offered to the Father in our place and on our behalf!

In his humanity, Jesus became our vicarious response to God in all things, including faith, conversion, worship, celebration of the sacraments and evangelism.

Ignored

Unfortunately, Karl Barth has generally been ignored or misinterpreted by American evangelicalism, and Thomas Torrance

is often presented as too hard to understand. But to fail to appreciate the dynamic nature of theology displayed in Barth’s reworking of the doctrine of election causes many evangelicals and Reformed Christians alike to remain caught in the behavioralism trap, struggling to understand where God draws the line between human behavior and salvation.

The great Reformation principle of ongoing reformation should free us from old worldviews and behavior-based theologies that inhibit growth, promote stagnation and prevent ecumenical cooperation within the Body of Christ. Yet today doesn’t the church often find itself robbed of the joy of grace as it shadowboxes with all its various forms of legalism? For this reason the church is not uncommonly characterized

as a bastion of judgmentalism and exclusivism rather than as a testament to grace.

We all have a theology—a way that we think about and understand God—whether we know it or not. And our theology affects how we think about and understand God’s grace and salvation.


If our theology is dynamic and relational, we will be open to hear God’s ever-present word of salvation, which he freely gives us by his grace though Jesus Christ alone. On the other hand, if our theology is static, we will shrivel into a religion of legalism, judgmentalism and spiritual stagnation.

Instead of knowing Jesus in an active and real way that seasons all our relationships with mercy, patience, kindness and peace, we will know judgment, exclusivity and condemnation of those who fail to meet our carefully defined standards of godliness.

New creation in freedom

Theology does make a difference. How we understand God affects the way we understand salvation and how we live the Christian life. God is not the prisoner of some static, humanly reasoned idea about what he must and should be.

Humans are not capable of reasoning out who God is and what he must be like. God tells us who he is and what he is like, and he is free to be exactly how he chooses to be, and he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as being the God who loves us, is for us and who chooses to make humanity’s cause—including your cause and my cause—his own.

In Jesus Christ, we are freed from our sinful minds, from our boasting and despair, and graciously renewed to experience God’s shalom peace in his loving faith community. In Jesus, we are free as God’s new creation, and as such, we learn in Jesus to love as God does—in freedom. 

Even in our repenting and believing we cannot rely on our own response, but in faith we rely only on the response that Christ has offered to the Father in our place and on our behalf!

Generosity as a way of life

By Randal Dick

I have known Mark Vincent of Design for Ministry for several years. He has presented seminars on Christian stewardship at our ministerial conferences in the United States and Europe. His challenging but highly effective approach is to show how a Christian can structure his or her resources around the concept of generosity and giving.

Our congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio, engaged Vincent Oct. 30 to help them plan their course for the future. After the seminar, John Halford interviewed him for the U.K. magazine. We thought you might find their conversation interesting.



John Halford

Giving as a way of life

An interview with Mark Vincent of Design for Ministry

John Halford: Your focus is not so much on making donations as organizing your whole life around using your possessions and resources in a generous way.

Mark Vincent: Yes, you have to make generosity a way of life. It isn't just money—it is your time, your talents and everything about you. All these must be considered as potential for worship through generosity—to demonstrate your love for God and your neighbor.

You have to plan for that. You can't have this great aspiration for generosity and then spend 103 percent of your income on yourself. You have to decide to organize your life around generosity. You need to spend less than you earn

so that you can have peace of mind, and the time and the inclination to help someone in unfortunate circumstances.

JH: Is this as a philosophy rather than a program?

MV: Yes. God has been generous toward the world, and as a part of God's family I am going to make my life a life of generosity, and I'll make my decisions with that in mind. Everyone's circumstances are different—so you can't legislate a formula.

JH: But surely generosity is a responsibility and not just an option for a Christian?

MV: I prefer characteristic rather than responsibility. If I am a Christian, if I have embraced God's gift of grace for me, and I know he is not holding my sins against me—when I realize what

I have been given—then generosity is going to overflow.

JH: If we were to respond with generosity to everyone with a good cause, we would soon be in need ourselves. How do we draw the line?

MV: I have a formula. It is to think where your greatest joy intersects with the needs of the world. In that crossroad we need to find a sustainable capacity for generosity. It is where I should focus my gifts and my generosity. It is a natural extension of the way God has created me.

Choose a charity or charities where you feel empathy—where you want to make a difference. Then, if someone asks: "Would you like to give to this organization," you can say: "Here's where my interests are. Here's where I am already giving. And here is where I can continue to grow in my giving." And someone else is going to have another priority. Then you can have a peace about giving what you can, and you don't have to feel guilty about what you say no to.

JH: Giving should not be a guilt trip then?

MV: No. If I get you to give out of guilt or fear, which is where a lot of fund-raising appeals are rooted, then the only way I am going to get you to give again is to make you feel guilty, or afraid or angry again.

JH: When talking or writing about giving, you use the word sustainable. Can you define it in the context of giving?

MV: Many of us can't afford to give because we have spent all our money on consumer items. So when it comes time to give, we have nothing. We should organize our resources so that giving is not haphazard, but an anticipated and budgeted part of our expenses. God in Christ has given us himself, and because of that we have hope. Now he asks us to give ourselves so that others might know him too.

JH: It seems that the poor are more generous than those who are better off. What can we learn from this?

MV: The poor are more likely to give more often and also a higher percentage. They don't have any pretense that they can survive on their own. They know the value of small amounts. They know that they must depend on God and each other. The rich feel they are in control of their circumstances.

It is important to gain control of your resources. But not so that you become self-sufficient. It is a serious spiritual mistake to ever feel you are self-sufficient. Jesus reminds us to be careful about the deceitfulness of riches, which can be as much a spiritual hazard as to be overwhelmed by the cares of this world. We all—rich and poor—owe our very existence to God's grace and generosity. 🦋

Equipping children for ministry

By Ted Johnston

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:16). Our passion and commitment in children's ministry is to not only let them come, but to bend down, gently take them by the hand, and then lead them to Jesus where he receives them with open arms.

As I write this article, our summer camp season is in full swing (and will be complete by the time you read this). Wonderful reports are coming in about hundreds of teens and children experiencing Jesus and learning to walk with him as his disciples. This is our primary mission at camp. We also work to equip dozens of youth ministry workers to be even more effective in ministering to these precious young ones back home. This column is also about equipping—specifically equipping ministry workers and parents for ministry to children.

Children's ministry (like all ministry, really) is about two relationships: First, as parents and ministry workers, we seek to have a loving relationship with the children. Second, through the influence of the first relationship, we seek to help children have a devoted relationship with Jesus.

In this second relationship, our part involves a four-part strategy. First we introduce children to Jesus (we call this winning the lost). Then we build them up in Jesus (building believers). Then we equip them to work with Jesus (equipping workers). And then we



equip some to be leaders among their peers (multiplying leaders).

In this article I'll discuss equipping children to be active workers with Jesus in his ministry in

our world.

Such equipping is not merely about programs—it's about a relational life-style where we (parents and children's ministry workers) walk hand-in-hand with the children through life—focused on working with Jesus as we go. One might compare this equipping relationship to an apprenticeship. The adult in the relationship is the



Illustration by Dan Andreason

God called Samuel to serve him as a young boy (1 Samuel 3:1-21).

experienced worker, and the child is the enthusiastic apprentice.

Perhaps you're asking, "What kind of work can a child do for Jesus?" I'm glad you asked. Based on what I read in Scripture and in my own ministry experience with children, I think the answer is that a child can do a great deal.

But it seems that we adults often overlook the potential for children to be active in serving God. Remember David, king of Israel? When he was a young boy, his father Jesse overlooked him when

it came time to anoint King Saul's replacement (1 Samuel 16:5-13). Jesse was blind to David's potential for this assignment. Fortunately, Samuel was open to hear from God on this matter. Perhaps that openness was related to his own experience when God called Samuel to serve him as a young boy (1 Samuel 3:1-21).

My prayer is that when we look at our children we will see what God sees, hear what God says, and act accordingly to equip our children for God's calling in their lives. And we know, in general, that he calls them to be disciplemaking followers of Jesus—working in that calling as an important part of the body of Christ, called to fulfill the great commission.

What can a child do to advance the great commission? They can contribute in meaningful and active ways. Let's think this through together. We can equip our chil-

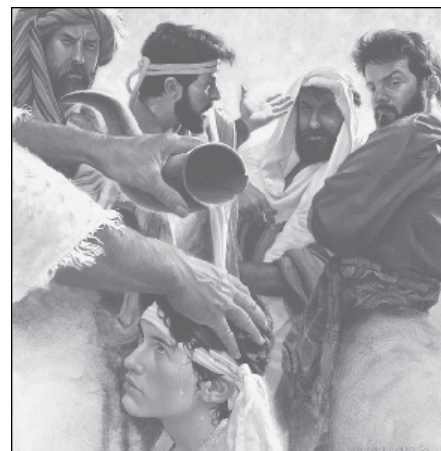


Illustration by Dan Andreason

Remember David, king of Israel? When he was a young boy, his father Jesse overlooked him when it came time to anoint King Saul's replacement (1 Samuel 16:5-13).

dren to minister alongside adults at church. Can a child read Scripture? Sure. Can a child help receive the offering or serve communion? Sure.

As parents and children's ministry workers, we need to equip children for two types of ministry in Jesus' service. First is their ministry to other believers. I have seen children at church (who were clearly equipped for this), taking time to talk to an elderly member—and thus extending Jesus' loving touch to another believer. What joy that can bring!



As parents and children's ministry workers, we need to equip children.

I was visiting a congregation on the East coast not long ago and a couple of young girls about age 10 circulated through the congregation, receiving the offering in baskets. They then brought the baskets to the front and joined an adult to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. They did a marvelous job—clearly they had been equipped for this work.

In another congregation I saw children on stage with the rest of the worship team, leading the congregation in singing praises to God. In another I saw a pre-teen playing drums in the worship band. Someone had gone to the time and expense to see that this young man was equipped to minister to the Lord and to his people in this way.

Second, we need to equip chil-

dren to minister to others outside of church. One of my pastor friends tells the story of his 11 year-old granddaughter who gave her life to Christ and was being equipped to share her faith with nonbelieving friends. Early in this equipping process she entered into the ministry of winning the lost.

She passed out flyers, inviting neighborhood children to a worship service to be conducted in her front yard.

Right there in her front yard she and a believing friend shared Christ with several non-churched children.

That's discipling ministry, and children can be equipped to take an active part. But who will apprentice them for their part? Who will be their equippers? Parents (and grandparents), the primary responsibility is yours. And the church wants to partner with you in this—equipping you for your vital job and co-ministering with you in the lives of your children.

Pastors, you set the pace for this in your congregation. Make it a place that highly values children and actively involves them

in the ministry of the congregation. So often children are mere spectators in worship services. It's

great (essential really) that the children have their own classes, but it's vital that they be equipped and then allowed to take an active up-front role in the big worship service.

This sends the message to the children and the adults watching that children are an important part of our ministry team in the congregation.

Youth ministry workers, you are called to be primary equippers of children in your congregation.

Invite the children in your care to be your apprentices and then work to impart to them the ministry skills you have developed. Make young disciples who will, in turn, make other young disciples.

All of us, let's show an active concern for every child in our congregation and in our lives outside the church building walls. Children need our gifts of love, time and equipping.

We give to children in these ways because of Christ and for their sake. 🦋

Children can be equipped to take an active part in ministry. But who will apprentice them for their part? Who will be their equippers?



Children need our gifts of love, time and equipping.

Exclusive interview with

Robert Farrar Capon, author of *Genesis: the Movie*

In 2004, Tim Brassell, pastor of New Creation Community Church, a WCG congregation in Portsmouth, Virginia, interviewed Christian author Robert Farrar Capon in the Capons' home in Shelter Island, New York.

"I was truly overwhelmed by Robert's and Valerie's graciousness," Tim told me. "The morning just flew by. We had lunch together, and then they invited me to return for dinner. They made me feel like we'd been friends for years."

Tim's friendship with the Capons began when he responded to a personal note of thanks that Valerie Capon had included in an autographed copy of one of Robert's books. Tim had purchased the book from the Capons through their Amazon.com Internet store.

When Tim called me to say that Robert Capon had agreed to give him an interview for *Christian Odyssey*, I was elated. I was at that moment reading Capon's latest book, *Genesis: the Movie*.

I was first introduced to Capon's work three years earlier, when Terry Akers, our book review editor, gave me a few photocopied pages from *The Parables of Judgment*. At the time I had never read Robert Capon (I may not have even heard of him), but on Terry's recommendation, I gave the book a try.

After reading the copied pages, I immediately went out and bought the book and couldn't put it down. Since that day I have found Capon's works to be on a par with those of C.S. Lewis for sheer clarity, inspiration and encourage-

ment in my Christian journey.

Tim Brassell is one of the most energetic and enthusiastic pastors I have known. When I hear the phrase, "on fire for the Lord," I think of him. When Pastor Tim is down in the dumps, he still seems higher than I am when I'm up.

We are delighted to run part one of this six-part interview here in our inaugural issue of *Christian Odyssey*. We hope you find it as rewarding as we have.

Mike Feazell

An interview with Robert Farrar Capon

Part One

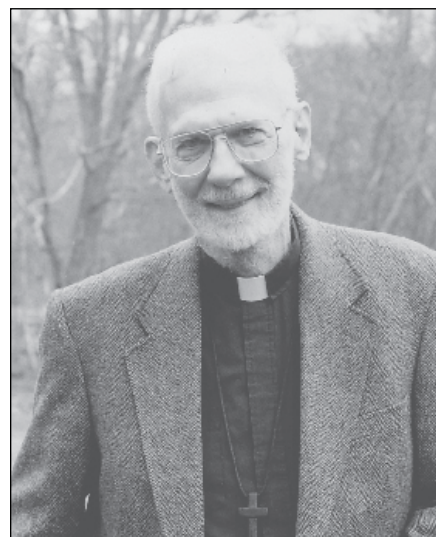
Shhh! Don't Interrupt!

Tim Brassell: Good morning, Dr. Capon. One of the topics in your new book, *Genesis: the Movie*, is what you referred to as biblical literalism. What is biblical literalism?



Tim Brassell

Robert Capon: Well, of course the book has a long, careful answer to that question. A short answer might be that biblical literalism is simply a mistake in the way people read the Bible. The object of *Genesis: the Movie* is to help people stop reading the Bible as if it were

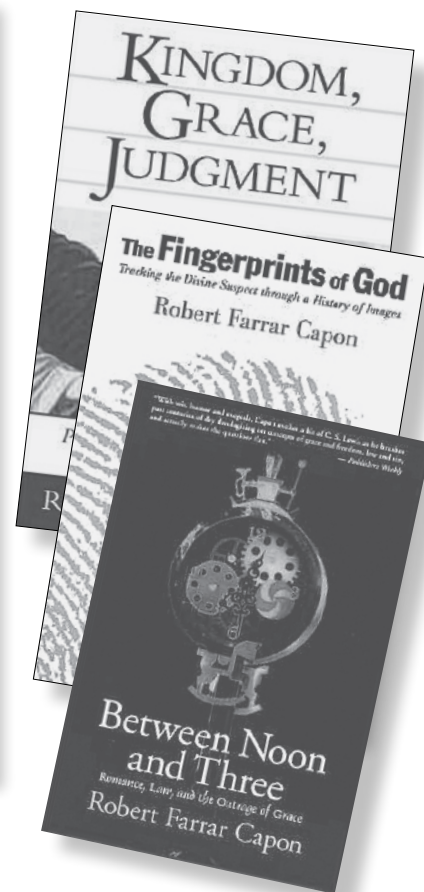
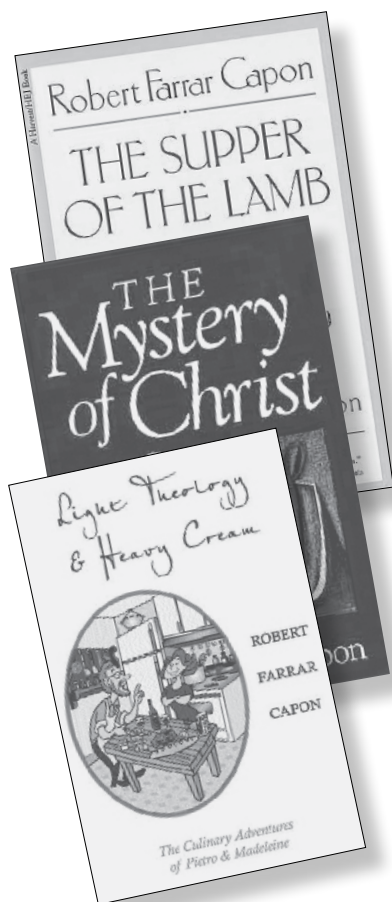


Robert F. Capon

a manual of instruction in religion or spirituality or morality or anything else and to start watching it as a film, presented to you by the Holy Spirit, who is the director.

TB: What is the difference?

RC: When you watch a movie, you don't stop 10 minutes into the film and try to decide what it means. You cannot fairly say anything about the movie until you have seen the whole movie and hold it in your mind as an entirety—as a whole piece. And that is what needs to be done with the Bible. It has to be seen as one thing. So I'd like people to see biblical inspiration, not as a matter of word-by-word inspiration, but as scenes in the movie the way the director wants to show it to you, that is, scene-by-scene.



TB: What are the pitfalls of not seeing it that way?

RC: The pitfalls are that you start teasing meanings out of things without seeing the whole picture. A simple example is that you cannot decide what the very first words in the Bible, "In the beginning," mean until you see all the other occurrences of the image of "beginning" in the rest of the film.

In other words, you can't properly understand that word beginning until you see Jesus, in John, say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And finally, at the end, where you have in Revelation, "I am the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega," and so on.

So as the movie progresses, we find that in the beginning was Christ, the incarnate Word. You have clues woven into the movie such as, "He chose us in him be-

fore the foundations of the world." When we see the whole picture, we can see what the director was doing across to us, from the beginning. Before anything was made, it was all already done within the Trinity. The whole thing was accomplished before it started.

TB: Just as in Revelation 13 where it says, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

RC: Yes, yes, yes!

TB: Is there an opposite ditch from biblical literalism?

RC: Yes. I call biblical literalism the literalism of the right. Now there is also a liberal literalism of the left. And that would be all the Bible critics who decided that you can't take everything seriously. They see the problem with literalism, but go to the opposite ditch, as you put it. In their view you need to try to find things you think are really true and say those

should be taken seriously, but the rest can be tossed away.

TB: So really, the liberal ditch is bad for the same reason.

RC: Yes, because they still don't escape literalism. They're still saying there is a sacred, literal original in there somewhere and they have found it by taking out stuff. But in the imagery of a movie you don't have that—you don't take out nothin'—you accept the film just as it is delivered. And, as with all the rules of film watching—don't interrupt! 🦋

Robert Capon Books

Autographed copies of Robert Farrar Capon's books are available from the author by clicking on the Amazon.com "used and new" button and going to seller "quietchina" for your purchase.

Lesson 23

A Lesson About Seeds

Mark 4:16-20

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.

By Mike Feazell

When sowers in Jesus' day would sow their seeds, some of the seeds would naturally wind up in places unfavorable to growth, while most of the seeds wound up in good soil. Jesus used the result of the seeds in the various kinds of terrain to illustrate the behavior of people with the gospel. He speaks of rocky places, thorny places and good soil.

It is important to note that the parable does not say that God sows people on rocky places; it says that the way some people receive the gospel is like seed sown on rocky places. It is a comparison, an illustration of how some people deal with the gospel. It is not a justification for viewing God as deliberately making it impossible for some people to embrace the gospel.

People who abandon the word of God in the face of persecution are like seeds that grow on rocky places and therefore have little root. In a similar manner, people who let the word of God take a back seat to the worries of life and the pursuit of wealth are like seeds that get choked among thorns and shrivel.

In contrast, people who hear the word of God and accept it and produce the fruit of it are like seeds that

germinate in good soil where there are no impediments to healthy growth.

Listening to Jesus

People, however, are not actually seeds, and God does not actually cast people into situations that prevent them from accepting the gospel. Jesus' parables should not be pushed beyond the point that Jesus intended them to make.

Seeds don't think. They don't make choices. They don't have the ability to ask God for help.

The point of the parable is not to tell us that we are hapless seeds doomed to whatever fate might chance to befall us because of the sower's indiscriminate scattering. The point of the parable is that we should take steps to prevent ourselves from acting like helpless seeds.

When we find ourselves letting the cares of this world put the gospel on the back burner of our lives, then Jesus wants us to take note and make a change. He wants us to deepen our spiritual roots, to chop up the spiritual thorns in our lives. He wants us to nestle into the good soil of spending time in his word, of taking our issues, our hopes, our fears and our triumphs to him in prayer. He wants us to put the word of God

to use in what we choose to do, to let the gospel flow out from us in kindness, mercy and peace.

It is easy to use the parable of the sower as a tool to judge others, to look down on people we think are weak in the faith and bound to fall away from the word of God. It is harder, but far more useful, to let the parable of the sower teach us and admonish us to keep an eye on our hearts, to make sure that greed, pride and anxious care about possessions and self-importance are not easing into

the driver's seat in our lives.

Are you looking for a New Year's resolution? How about this one: Hear the word, accept it and love others as Jesus loves us. That's the lesson of the parable of the sower. 🦋



Messy Spirituality—

Michael Yaconelli

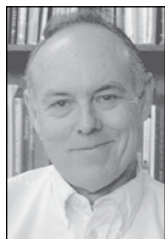
By Terry Akers

Christian youth ministry suffered a loss in 2003 when Mike Yaconelli died in an auto accident at age 61. He was a speaker, author and co-founder of Youth Specialties (www.youthspecialties.com), a ministry to youths and youth workers.

Yaconelli was not ordained but ministered for more than 40 years as a lay pastor, writer and lecturer. His last book, *Messy Spirituality—God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*, summed up his life and message. His passion for living and uncompromising honesty gave him wide acceptance across denominational lines and among youths of all ages. He deplored prepackaged answers. Instead he focused on our need for God and honesty about our brokenness.

Yaconelli tried to get people to examine their beliefs and assumptions. He thought that the church needed to "get over itself" and quit taking itself so seriously. He taught that being in love with Jesus was the key to conquering the frustrations of institutionalism and bureaucracy.

In *Messy Spirituality*, Yaconelli's habit of speaking the truth in regard to the messy nature of our relationship with God has upset many modern Pharisees. Religion can become obsessed with its image and will do anything to protect it, including denial. There are always those who don't want their religious applegarts upset and can become quite indignant when the facade is exposed. Yaconelli had



a gift for cutting through the hypocrisies, inconsistencies and perfectionism that plague the modern church.

As this book illustrates, Yaconelli went about his ministry with humor and humility. His sincere, engaging

style was instrumental in changing the face of youth ministry over the last three decades, making Jesus' gospel of unconditional love relevant to this generation. *Messy Spirituality* was written for those who have bought into the lie that "competence is one of the fruits of the Spirit" and have become convinced that they "just don't do Christianity right."

Yaconelli shows how real discipleship is "messy, erratic, lopsided and ... gloriously liberating."

He dares to ask, "What if genuine faith begins with admitting we will never have our act completely together?"

Messy Spirituality shows how God's unconditional and transforming love for us is the essence of true spirituality. It is about loving and being loved—it is not based on the ideas conjured up in human minds that only serve to make us feel like we are never measuring up. Realistically, our spiritual growth chart should not be viewed as a perfect 45 degree angle, but more like the Dow Jones graph. Yaconelli says that Jesus not only loves us, he likes us, shortcom-

ings and all. He redeems our inconsistencies, doubts, addictions and failures by his unceasing grace, transforming them into new creation. God turns "our messes into his masterpieces." We need not be paralyzed by our past; we can receive real healing, peace and freedom in Christ Jesus.

Through true life story after heartrending story he describes how God creatively uses our most profound weaknesses to work his greatest wonders. Throughout the book he makes it clear that spirituality is not a formula; not a

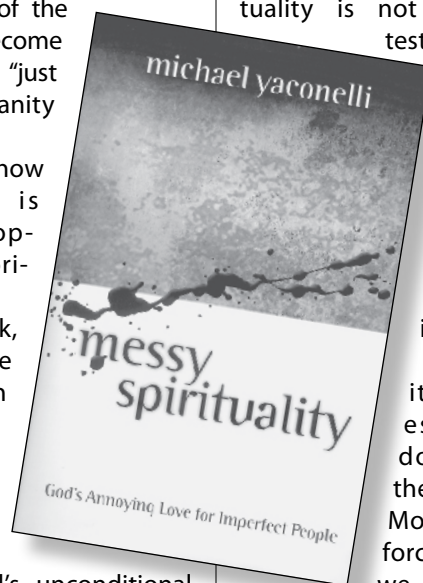
test or program. It is a relationship. It is not about competence; it is about intimacy. It is not about being fixed; it is about God's redeeming presence in the midst of our inadequacies.

Messy Spirituality's message teaches us how to slow down and focus on the things that matter. Most importantly, it forcefully declares how we have been accepted

by God in Jesus

Christ. When really believed, this becomes the most liberating piece of knowledge we could ever possess. It effectively demonstrates how our messes are merely God's opportunities.

Please note: All the books reviewed in *Christian Odyssey* are available, usually discounted, at www.amazon.com or through your local Christian bookstore.



The Wisdom of Weakness

a study of 1 Corinthians 1

By Michael Morrison

The church in Corinth was beset by problems—divided into rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, the talented and the average. Some members claimed to have special knowledge that Paul did not have. They began to look down on his simple message about a man who was killed by the Romans. They wrote him a letter asking for more information on several topics, and Paul learned even more about the church in Corinth from people who had been there.



Greetings

Paul's reply is now known as 1 Corinthians. He begins, as ancient letters normally did, by saying who he was and naming the people he was writing to: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth" (v. 1, TNIV throughout).

He then reminds them of who they are: "To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours" (v. 2). They are called to be holy, but they are also called to be part of a larger group. That will be important later in the letter.

Greek letters usually began with *chara*, greetings, but Paul modifies this to *charis* (grace) and peace (the typical Jewish greeting): "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Greek orators would often begin a speech by praising the audience, but Paul modifies this to praise God for what he is doing in the readers: "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you" (vv. 3-6).

The Corinthian Christians prided themselves on their speaking and their knowledge. Paul acknowledges these as blessings from God, and as evidence in support of the gospel of Christ. He will address their problems later in the letter.

Since God has been generous to them, he writes: "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 7-8). Paul here subtly reminds them to stick firmly to their original faith, rather than accepting odd new doctrines. Don't forget that salvation depends on Christ!

A divided congregation

He begins with a plea for unity: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (v. 10). However, perfect agreement is pointless if it means that everyone believes the same heresy. So in this letter Paul will try to set them on the right track.

Paul had heard that the congregation was divided into different groups, some claiming to follow one leader, and some another (vv. 11-12). But Paul didn't want even his own name to be an excuse for division: "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name" (vv. 13-15).

But then Paul stops to correct himself: "Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else" (v. 16). These verses show the way that letters were written: What Paul said was written and sent, even if he had to correct himself along the way. The original document was sent, without editing.

"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (v. 17). Paul did baptize people—and he assumed that all the readers had been baptized—but the gospel was his priority. The message centered on Christ, not on a ritual. Paul wanted to persuade people with the facts, not with the flowery oratory

Perfect agreement is pointless if it means that everyone believes the same heresy.

that some Greek philosophers used to attract a following.

God's power and wisdom

The message about a crucified Messiah might seem preposterous to some people, but God uses that message to bring salvation to those who believe. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18). Paul then quotes Isa. 29:14: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

God works in unexpected ways—some people might say that the gospel of grace is a message of weakness, but Paul says it is a message of power (Rom. 1:16).

"Where are the wise?" Paul asks. They are not in the church. "Where is the teacher of the law?" They are not accepting the message of salvation, either. "Where is the philosopher of this age?" Not here. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20).

Humans value education, but God's message does not depend on human approval. People cannot know God through their own intelligence, and they cannot save themselves by any amount of philosophy or study. Instead, God decided to save people who believed the gospel (v. 21).

"Jews demand signs [miracles] and Greeks look for wisdom [philosophy], but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (vv. 22-24). The message is too simple for some people, but God uses it to save his people.

The crucified Christ may look weak and foolish, but this is the power and wisdom of God. "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (v. 25). This is the basis of unity in the church: accepting the gospel of Christ crucified—people being saved by the shameful death of Christ.



The wisdom of God

Remember that you were ordinary people when you heard the gospel, Paul says. You were not the movers and shakers of Corinth. "But God chose the foolish things of the world"—that's you—"to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (vv. 27-29).

If people could save themselves through their own intelligence, then the kingdom of God would be filled with people who were proud of their own accomplishments. If people could get in through their own abilities, they would think that they were just as good as God.

The crucified Christ may look weak and foolish, but this is the power and wisdom of God.

So God decided to call the nobodies of this world, those who were willing to admit their need, those who were willing to accept the gift of salvation. And this plan will eventually

shame the wise and humiliate the proud, who will then be able to realize that their own strength, no matter how good it was, was not good enough.

Because of God's plan, Paul writes, "you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let those who boast boast in the Lord'" (vv. 30-31, quoting from Jer. 9:24). Jesus is our righteousness—it is in him, and only in him, that we can be righteous and holy. Only when we are in Christ, united with him by faith, can we be redeemed. We cannot boast about anything we did—our only boast is in what Christ does for us. He gets the credit and the praise. 🦋

Questions for discussion

- | In what way has God enriched you? (v. 5).
- | How can people be perfectly united in mind and thought? (v. 10)
- | Is v. 14 an inspired mistake?
- | Can the wise and wealthy accept the unexpected wisdom of God? (v. 20)
- | If Christ is our righteousness, do we need any of our own? (v. 30)

Lectionary Readings for January 2005

Many churches assign passages of Scripture to be read on each Sunday, in a three-year rotation. This is called a lectionary—from the Latin word *lectio*, meaning “reading.” Below are the readings suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary, which is used by many Protestant churches. (Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopal churches use a slightly different lectionary.) Sermons are often based on one of the readings.

We are now in lectionary year “A.” Jan. 6, which comes at the end of the Twelve days of Christmas, is traditionally known as Epiphany, observed in different traditions as a commemoration of the visit of the wise men, the baptism of Jesus or the miracle at Cana. Many churches now commemorate the baptism of Jesus on the first Sunday after Jan. 6.

Church History Corner

Fasting and Repentance After the Salem Witch Trials

On Jan. 15, 1697, the town of Salem and the Massachusetts Bay Colony proclaimed a day of fasting and repentance because of the senseless witch trials and executions that had occurred five years earlier in the colony. More than 150 people were accused of being witches and were imprisoned, and 19 suspected witches were hanged.

The day of personal and public repentance was called “so all of God’s people may offer up fervent supplications unto him, that all iniquity may be put away, which hath stirred God’s holy jealousy against this land; that he would show us what we know not, and help us, wherein we have done amiss, to do so no more.”

The witch hunting hysteria had begun when two children claimed they were bewitched by certain townspeople. Later, during the trial, other children and young people made similar accusations. No real evidence of Satan worship, witchcraft or other paranormal activities was presented. Most of the accused were women, though it included the Rev. George Burroughs, former minister of Salem Village, who was hanged on Aug. 19, 1692.

While the witch trials were an isolated unbiblical miscarriage of justice in a tiny community, they point out the fact that Christians must avoid having their faith high-jacked by hysteria, scapegoating or superstition. There have been other, more extensive miscarriages in Christian history, such as the Inquisition, which remind us that we need to always live in step with the Holy Spirit and to show forth the wisdom and love of Christ to others in all situations.

Lectionary Readings for January 2005

Jan. 2, 2005

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 147:12-20
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:1-18

Jan. 23, 2005

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 4-9
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

Jan. 9, 2005

(First Sunday after Epiphany)

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

Jan. 30, 2005

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Jan. 16, 2005

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-11
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Feb. 6, 2005

(Transfiguration Sunday)

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2 or Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

In Our Place

Jesus steps into the actual situation where we are summoned to have faith in God, to believe and trust in him, and he acts in our place and in our stead from within the depths of our unfaithfulness and provides us freely with a faithfulness in which we may share.

Thomas F. Torrance,
The Mediation of Christ, p. 78
Helmets & Howard