

Faith, Church, and Three Minorities: Christian Existence in the Third Millennium, Highland Community Church, April 18, 2004

Introduction: Life Itself Is Grace

This sermon is a self-awareness that has bubbled up many times, but I've never given formal expression to in written or preached word. As a Christian, I live a minority status in three worlds. I think all Christians should! The burden of this meditation is to discuss these three worlds. They are not all bad! There is in fact much good in each. After all, God said of all his creation, "It is good."

But I live a minority existence nonetheless. In each of three worlds. And it may be of interest to give an accounting. You hopefully will find yourself identifying with me somewhat. Whether in identification or reaction, we can all come out hopefully healthier at the end of this morning's journey, for entering into dialogue. I intend to offer opportunity for dialogue for just that purpose.

Frederick Buechner says that all theology arises from the intersection between God and humanity. Of course! Where else would we even understand theology than caught forever in that impossible dialectic? Buechner calls us hence to "listen to our lives", almost title in fact, of a book of readings from Buechner's many publications, compiled by George Connor: *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations With Frederick Buechner*. The opening reading goes:

"I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened up onto extraordinary vistas... There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.... If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace (*Listening To Your Life: Daily Meditations With Frederick Buechner*, compiled by George Connor, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p. 2)."

It is no less important to listen to one another's life. For it is in the other – so necessary for God's creation of humanity also to be divinely dubbed "good", though not initially when humanity ('*adam*') was "alone" – that one discovers the amazing echo of one's own life, the telltale sign of God's footprints in it.

But as always, we need eyes to see, and most definitely ears to hear: both one another and oneself.

The First Minority: Salvation in Jesus Christ

Scripture: *The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.* (Psalm 118)

The first minority in which I find myself is nonetheless numerically a very significant minority! Christians of all persuasions, totaling some 34,000 separate groups worldwide (consequence of what Ron Dart dubs the DNA of Protestant schism!), represents about 33% of the world's population (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/worldrel.htm>). However, about 75% of adults in the US and Canada call themselves Christian. In America, about 35% would take on the self-designation of "born again", or "Evangelical". This represents about 100 million people. In Canada about 19% of us claim to be "Evangelical" (<http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/pdf/CWwint04.pdf>). That is close to 6 million people.

I find myself, on my best days, amongst those who believe in and in some way practise or act on:

- Forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ
- That Jesus is the Son of God/God Incarnate
- That God is not an old superstition
- That the Bible is God's Word to be taken seriously
- A commitment to follow or imitate Jesus
- Regular participation in church

I am, by these research standards, part of that significant minority dubbed "Evangelical". I am guessing to a large extent, so are you – on your best days!

Over against a culture of practical atheism, that has displaced God for all intents in our day-to-day living by our technologies and our solipsistic rationality (a commitment to reason that always loops back on the centrality of self), we Christians claim a true transcendence in the cosmos.

Gil Bailie says it well:

"The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that's the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus' suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: to *love God* (Bailie, Gil (1995). *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* New York: Crossroad.p. 272)."

At its best, belonging to this significant minority known variously as "Evangelical", "Orthodox", "Traditional", "Catholic", or simply "Christian", is constantly living towards a vision of life and the cosmos that transcends every limiting category known to humanity, that fills one with intense longing (C.S. Lewis used the German word

Sehnsucht; Augustine called it a “God-shaped vacuum”), that makes us profoundly resonate with the Negro spiritual, “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through.”

An unlikely source for illustrating this is a short story by Herbert George (H. G.) Wells, from a collection of short stories he wrote early in his career entitled, *The Time Machine and Other Stories*. Unlikely, since Wells wrote at the end of his life, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, a depressing post-World War II work that offered little hope for humanity, and saw no consolation in any religious belief.

The story is entitled “The Door in the Wall”, and was reprinted in my Grade 12 reader, *Man and His World*. In that same reader, incidentally, was my first introduction to C.S. Lewis, and to G.K. Chesterton, both valiant witnesses to the faith.

Lionel Wallace was a man who moved through life from success to success, and never looked back, so the first-person narrator informs us in Wells’ story. But there was a great mystery to Lionel Wallace. “I have,” he said, “a preoccupation – ... I am haunted. I am haunted by something – that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings... (Wells, H. G. (1961). “The Door in the Wall”, *Man and His World: Studies in Prose*, Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, p. 96).” The first-person narrator tells how “One confidential evening, not three months ago (ibid, 1961, p. 95),” “he began to tell of the thing that was hidden in his life, the haunting memory of a beauty and happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings, that made all the interests and spectacle of worldly life seem dull and tedious and vain to him... (ibid, 1961, p. 97).”

One day, when Wallace was only 5 years old, he wandered off down the street, and came upon a “white wall and a green door (ibid, 1961, p. 98).” He felt an overwhelming desire to enter, which he did in a burst of determination. “And so, in a trice, he came into the garden [!] that has haunted all his life... There was something in the very air of it that exhilarated, that gave one a sense of lightness and good happening and well-being; there was something in the sight of it that made all its colour clean and perfect and subtly luminous. In the instant of coming into it one was exquisitely glad – as only in rare moments, and when one is young and joyful one can be glad in this world. And everything was beautiful there (ibid, 1961, p. 99).”

I will not tell you the rest of the tale. This is a conversion story! This is John Wesley’s heart “strangely warmed”:

“In the evening,” Wesley writes, “I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death (“I Felt My Heart Strangely Warmed”, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, no date, <http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/journal/htm/vi.ii.xvi.htm>).”

This is Augustine's amazing chance encounter while passing by kids at play:
"While he was wrestling intensely in his heart with his desires, he heard the voice of a child nearby singing lyrics which sounded like 'Take it, read it! Take it, read it!' ... Augustine sensed in these words a personal invitation from God.

"After going into his house, Augustine picked up the Scriptures and began to read what we now know as Romans 13:13-14: '...not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.'

"Augustine says that from that moment forward his direction was set, conversion took hold. Christ, through the letter of Paul written hundreds of years earlier, had spoken so forcefully to Augustine that peace flooded his heart, giving him courage (Zilonka, C.P., Father Paul, no date, <http://www.cpryion.org/compassion/spr96/read.html>)."

This is Blaise Pascal's vision, of whom Albert Einstein said he possessed the most brilliant mathematical mind of the previous 1000 years:

"When he was 31 years old, less than eight years before his death, Pascal had an overwhelming experience of the presence of God. He apparently made hasty notes, during the vision or immediately afterwards, so that he might always have at hand a reminder of what had happened to him. He transcribed these onto a piece of parchment and sewed it into the lining of his coat, where his servant found it after his death. There is no evidence of his having mentioned the experience to anyone while he lived. The parchment reads in part as follows (Bible references added; translation by Emile Caillet and John C. Blankenagel *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1948):

"MEMORIAL

"In the year of grace, 1654, on Monday, 23rd of November... From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve, FIRE!

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, (Ex 3:6; Mt 22:32) not of the philosophers and scholars.

"Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

"God of Jesus Christ.

" 'Thy God and my God.' (Jn 20:17)

"Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God.

...

"Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy (Kiefer, James E., no date, "Blaise Pascal, Scientist, Religious Writer: 21 August, 1662", *Biographical Sketches of Memorable Christians of the Past*, <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/233.html>)."

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. (Psalm 118)

The Second Minority: “Just Peacemaking”

Scripture: “*We must obey God rather than men.*” (Acts 5:29)

In January, 1975, during my first year of studies at Regent College, I took a course from Clark Pinnock called “The Politics of Jesus”. Little did I know it would change forever my understanding and commitments to Christian ethics. Our main text for the course was something that felt so alien to the Gospel I had earlier committed to, and, most recently, for which I had just returned from a two-year evangelistic mission in West Berlin. Its title too was *The Politics of Jesus*. I came out the other end of that experience committed to two entirely new understandings about the Gospel: that the Judeo-Christian story was centrally a *political story*, and that the way of the cross, and therefore the way of doing politics, was quintessentially *non-violent*, and its impact socially and politically was subversion of all violent ways, in particular of dominant Empire ways recurrent throughout human history, not least today through the American Empire to our south in its global war against terror.

My dual conversion experience is in good company – not of Wesley, Augustine, and Pascal, but of James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas, both noted American theologians who trace the origins of their lifelong pacifism to reading that same book by John Howard Yoder!

Stanley Hauerwas, considered by *Time* magazine as “America’s best theologian”, writes: “... I am convinced that when Christians look back on this century of theology in America *The Politics Of Jesus* will be seen as a new beginning...” Hauerwas continues: “Yet Yoder also challenges those evangelicals who describe salvation in terms of personal fulfillment. ‘The cross of Calvary was... the political, legally to be expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society.’...”

“Yoder does not think he is offering a radical new account of Jesus. ‘We do not here advocate an unheard-of modern understanding of Jesus; we ask rather that the implications of what the church has always said about Jesus as Word of the Father, as true God and true Man, be taken more seriously, as relevant to our social problems, than ever before.’”

“[Yoder] is trying to force us to recognize that in spite of what appears to be orthodox christological affirmations, we are embedded in social practices that deny that Jesus's life, death and resurrection make any difference (Hauerwas, Stanley, “When The Politics of Jesus Makes a Difference”, *The Christian Century*, October 13, 1993, pp. 982-987).”

Ever since reading Yoder¹, I became committed to non-violence.

¹ I must add a brief footnote – not in the sermon. Yoder, sadly, until his death, was under a cloud due to sexual abuse against various women. To his credit, he submitted to the discipline of the church in line with his biblical understanding.

And this is overwhelmingly a minority position in the long history of the church and world! As Gandhi rightly observed: “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians.”

Richard Hays published a major study on Christian ethics entitled, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. In Chapter 14, “Violence in Defense of Justice”, he said: “One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) ...

“Only when the church renounces the way of violence will people see what the Gospel means, because then they will see the way of Jesus reenacted in the church.... The meaning of the New Testament’s teaching on violence will become evident only in communities of Jesus’ followers who embody the costly way of peace (Hays, Richard (1996). *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, HarperSanFrancisco, pp. 343 & 344).”

The central hallmark of this way of peace is pro-active “just peacemaking” that refuses both the stagnant passivity of pacifism and the destructive aggression of “just war”. It is the most neglected aspect of our Christian spirituality, summed up in Jesus’ two interdependent commands:

“... ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matt 22:37-39).”

The litmus test of Christian spirituality – love of God – is love of neighbour. The litmus test of love of neighbour is love of enemy. Fail to love the enemy – the Communist of a bygone era, the homosexual, the Taliban Afghani, the Baath Iraqi separatist, the stateless terrorist, etc., etc. – and *to that extent we fail to love God. There is no Christian spirituality that bypasses or destroys the enemy.*

Over against the long history of the church, over against wide Evangelical opinion today, this political understanding of the centrality of the neighbour/enemy to salvation and spirituality is in a minority position: the second I inhabit.

The Third Minority: The Way of Jesus is “With The Grain of the Universe”

Scripture: *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.* (Ps 118)

I once received a phone call from a person writing up his personal memoirs. He was asking permission to include a letter to the editor I had written about capital punishment published in the *Vancouver Sun*. He was shocked in the conversation to hear I was a committed Christian; still more upset to learn I attempted to be faithful to a serious

reading of Scripture. I don't think my letter ever found its way into his memoirs, despite permission granted...

The third minority sphere I inhabit is, over against fellow Christians (and others!) who embrace social justice and non-violence, I centre that commitment in Jesus Christ as known through the books of the Old and New Testaments, the Bible.

James McClendon writes:

“We have the concept of Christian Scripture in its two volumes or Testaments. This does not mean, as the bare word “scripture” might suggest, only something written, a book or text. We have rather a text, a Book, that centers on that person in whom final authority rests, and by doing this acquires a delegated or proximate authority. This text is the chosen, written witness to Jesus Christ and to God in Christ.... [T]he Bible is for us the word of God written; it is that text in which the One who lays claim to our lives by the act of his life makes that claim afresh in acts of speech; it is for us God speaking; it is the word of God. Such a claim made by a book upon a people is radical and unsettling—an authority subversive of all sorts of competing, other, human authorities (McClendon, Jr., James Wm. (1994). *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 464).”

A fellow church member has wrestled with the biblical text, and now takes it “theologically”, but no longer seriously as “text”, which he says needs to be at times “transcended”. This I find confusing and unhelpful! I suggested to him that we always have a “text”, the biblical text, another, or others.

The whole enterprise of “The Jesus Seminar”, for instance, that some of you will have read about over the years, is to get “behind the curtain” as it were, and do a historical reconstruction to discover the “real Jesus” apart from the biblical text.

To this, Richard Hays responds: “It would be a curious act of intellectual hubris to suppose that our speculative reconstruction could give us a picture of Jesus immune to the vicissitudes of subjectivity (Hays, 1996, *ibid*, p. 159).” And Luke Johnson writes in response to one of the leading Jesus Seminar adherents, “Does not [Dominic] Crossan’s picture of a peasant cynic preaching inclusiveness and equality fit perfectly the idealized ethos of the late twentieth century academic?” (L. T. Johnson quoted in Hays, *ibid*, 1996, p. 167).”

James McClendon writes of three classic ways of diluting, or neutralizing the biblical text:

“Not surprisingly, then, Christian history itself is replete with schemes that – though not consciously so intended – serve to limit or control this radically unsettling Book. Three such schemes—(a) use of historical-critical exegesis in a way that keeps Scripture at a ‘suitably’ remote distance, (b) use of tradition so as to monopolize the interpretation of Scripture, and (c) use of inerrancy theories so as to confine the thrust of Scripture – these schemes are potent enough to require separate notice here (McClendon, *ibid*, 1996, p. 464).”

Stanley Hauerwas in 2001 was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. It is a highly prestigious lecture series. The title of the talks and book was *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. It comes from a line in Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder's writings, "... people who bear crosses are working *with the grain of the universe* (quoted in Hauerwas, Stanley (2001). *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, p. 17, italics added)."

Hauerwas' "hero of this book (Peter Ochs, *ibid*, back cover)," is Karl Barth, whom my teacher (Clark Pinnock) at Regent College in a Karl Barth course constantly referred to as a "theological Mount Everest". In sheer volume of writings, he dwarfed all contemporary 20th century theologians, having produced an unfinished monumental theology in fourteen volumes entitled *Church Dogmatics*, besides numerous other publications. I read of one appreciative student in North America who literally would go for long walks just to burn off the intellectual and spiritual energy from Barth's captivating style and content!

Hauerwas writes that "Barth shows us the way theology must be done if the subject of theology, that is, the God of Jesus Christ, is to be more than just another piece of the metaphysical furniture in the universe (*ibid*, 2001, pp. 145 & 146)." His rediscovery of God in the Scriptures early in his career as a pastor led to a definitive break with the Liberalism of his time which made humans "the measure of all that is", something Hauerwas dubs one "of the most cherished conceits of modernity (*ibid*, 2001, p. 145)." For Hauerwas, "The conceptual and moral implications of the claim that God is God and that we are not would occupy the rest of Barth's life and work (*ibid*, 2001, p. 152)." Hand in hand with this is "Barth's extraordinary claim that Christ is the truth by which all other truth is to be judged... (*ibid*, 2001, p. 163)." Barth spent a lifetime living and writing about the implications of what he described as a shattering "discovery of the 'strange new world within the Bible' (*ibid*, 2001, p. 150)." This is not unlike H.G. Wells' green-door world, or the "strangely warmed" heart of John Wesley, or Augustine's discovery of how to fill his God-shaped vacuum, or the fire of Blaise Pascal's vision.

Says Hauerwas, "Barth had a single concern: to use every resource at his disposal to show that our existence and the existence of the universe are unintelligible if the God found in Jesus Christ is not God (*ibid*, 2001, pp. 190 & 191)." Thus, "For Barth, to be a Christian, to anticipate here and now the future universal praise of God, *is to be a member of a limited and prophetic minority* (*ibid*, 2001, pp. 197 & 198, italics added)."

This is the ethical fallout of attempted faithfulness. To be in such a minority...

In Hauerwas' last lecture entitled, "The Necessity of Witness", John Howard Yoder and Pope John II are discussed as examples of those who lived or live out and point to a reality first and foremost to be embraced by the "politics called church (*ibid*, 2001, p. 239).", namely that "*the cross and not the sword reveals to us the very grain of the universe* (*ibid*, 2001, p. 230, italics added)."

This third minority position, that would live out of biblical faithfulness to doing politics according to the non-violent way of Jesus, is as utterly overwhelming as it is captivating.

Conclusion: To Live in Three Minorities Presupposes Grace

And the conclusion of this entire matter? I believe the Christian call is to three minorities:

- over against those who would not see Jesus, we choose to see him as Saviour and Lord of the *kosmos*;
- over against those who would not follow Jesus in the costly discipleship of the non-violent way of the cross, we do, counting the cost which ultimately is our very lives!
- and over against those in a post-modern world who are suspicious of the biblical text, as of all texts, with Jesus as its central hermeneutic or interpretative guide, we look to Jesus as the sole Exemplar to point us in the direction of “the grain of the universe”.

To live in these three minorities is impossible without grace, which, to return to Buechner, life itself is one long stream of, if we are listening!

On that note I end as I began, and open it up for some brief discussion.

Amen.