

Addresses

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Southern Baptist Forum

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"Priests to Each Other"

(Exodus 19:5; Ephesians 2:18-21; 1 Peter 2:4-10)

by Molly Marshall-Green

Baptist talk. When something needs to be sorted out, Baptists talk. We have never been thought of as a "silent people." These days, Baptists are talking about the "priesthood of the believer." Many are incensed at the cavalier treatment this doctrine received at the hands of the hands of the Resolution Committee of the SBC at San Antonio, June 1988. They fear, and rightly so, that a creeping ecclesiastical hierarchy will destroy what we as Baptists, firmly imbedded in the Free Church tradition, have long cherished. In this message, I will offer a biblical and theological interpretation of the meaning of the priesthood of the believer and show how this doctrine must continue to shape our identity as Baptists.

I am particularly grateful to be invited to participate in this Forum. By inviting both men and women to proclaim, we are demonstrating that we believe in this most Baptist of beliefs. I grew up on northeastern Oklahoma, singing "Wherever He Leads, I'll Go"; and I am thankful that many good church folk and teachers have encouraged me to do just that. I firmly believe that Baptists trust one another enough to believe that each can hear the voice of God calling—one is not disqualified by gender!

According to the New Testament, the Church is a "royal priesthood"—this is a theme implicit in several of the Pauline Epistles and is explicit in 1 Peter 2:9. This priesthood is to be understood in terms of God's mission and is a continuation of that of Israel. The pivotal Old Testament passage is Exodus 19:5:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Clearly, priesthood, covenant, and mission are closely related. God's covenant relationship with Israel was in order that the nation might be used for a universal blessing (cf. Gen. 11:3; Isa. 55:3ff; 56:6ff).

The religion of Yahweh was not to be the exclusive privilege of Israel, but was for all humanity, and her election was to be the medium of blessing to all nations. Israel was therefore chosen by God that the Gentiles might come to know God through the witness of the nation. In exercising this mission Israel would fulfill the purpose of her election by attempting to bring God to all persons and all persons to God. Hence the meaning of Israel's priesthood was to be found in the exercise of a

mediatorial function on behalf of God and the world. And, you are aware, Israel came to view the priesthood primarily in a cultic way. Tribe and sex and physical well-being determined priesthood.

The failure of Israel to carry out this mission, culminating in the crucifixion of God's Messiah, however, did not mean the failure of the divine purpose. This priestly mission of God's people passed to the Church. The link between the mission of the covenant people Israel and the church is made possible by the Messiah. He is the "high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1); hence the church derives its priestly character from its continuity with Israel through Christ. Christ is the foundation of the priesthood of each believer.

Two other New Testament texts refine the biblical understanding of priesthood. Ephesians 2:18-21 uses the metaphor of a new household of God, in which both Jews and Gentiles have an equal part, built upon Christ, the cornerstone. 1 Peter 2:4-10 extends the household metaphor and brings to clarity the members of this "dwelling place of God." The "living stones" are God's holy priesthood, functioning to bear witness to the mercy of God in the world."

As you know, Baptists are the theological heirs of Reformation thought. Perhaps Martin Luther offered the clearest explanation of the concept of the "priesthood of the believer" in his treatise on the "Freedom of a Christian."¹ This is almost an autobiographical confession of faith; in it one can hear his experience of emancipation through faith. Yet no element in his teaching is more misunderstood. For some it means simply that there should not be "priests" in the church; this is how the Quakers understood Luther. Hence, there is no distinct order of ministry within the church.

More common is the belief, according to Timothy George, "that the priesthood of all believers implies that every Christian is his or her own priest and hence possesses the 'right of private judgment' in matters of faith and doctrine."² This latter interpretation seems to reign in Baptist life today. But neither of these perspectives reflects Luther's quite biblical understanding of the priesthood of the believer.

His understanding was simply this: **Every Christian is someone else's priest, and we are all priests to one another.**³ If we have Christ's word, Luther asserts, we have Christ himself and all that is his, so that we share in his priesthood. Thus, the Christian is "the most free lord of all," in union with Christ. Through him Christians share with each other the things of God. So also the Christian is "the most dutiful servant of all," helping others without the hope of reward and joining in mutual service even to the extent that we become "Christ to one another."

Luther helps us greatly at this point. Many persons today look at this doctrine as the privatized domain of the soul in the presence of the Lord. And yes, it does tell us that no Christian requires a mediator between him or her and God. One can hear the voice of God for oneself. Yet, God has more to say to us than any of us can hear by ourselves,⁴ as Richard Foster reminds us. Further, the idea of being a "priest" suggests responsibility for others. Just as Israel was not chosen simply for her own benefit, neither is the Christian nor the communion of saints to be preoccupied with the state of its personal spiritual welfare.

Luther said an audacious thing: Christians are called to be "little Christs." That means that you and I are called to be for God and for others in the manner that he was. When the tendency of sinful humanity is to be curved in upon itself, this concept reminds us that we live "no

longer for ourselves.”

Many of the clergy (as you might imagine!) resisted Luther's suggestions, particularly at the point of the freedom of the individual Christian in interpretation of the Bible. There had long prevailed among the clergy a strong sense of peril in placing the Scripture in the hands of lay persons. To Luther, the testimony of Scripture—rather than tradition or scholastic opinions—was the sufficient test of all doctrines, and the laity was not only to be instructed in the Scriptures but also to read and mediate upon it for themselves. We need to hear again this call to responsible discipleship.

Closely tied to the “priesthood of the believer” is another hallmark of Baptist life, the “liberty of the conscience.” Like the “priesthood of the believer” this concept suggests that one has freedom before God; neither creeds nor confessions, neither pope or pastoral authority can presume to function as divine guidance for one's life. Liberty of conscience does not suggest that one has no Lord—it is simply concerned that no council, creed, confession or presumptuous creep usurp the position that belongs to God alone.

Often Baptist writers have used the language of “soul competency” when speaking of the individual's responsibility before God. This does not mean that one stands in stark independence, charting one's course without assistance. Rather, it means that there are no second-class Christians.

The priesthood of all believers is a responsibility as well as an opportunity. God has made us a communion of saints. We are related for a purpose. “The fact that we are all priests and kings means that each of us Christians may go before God and intercede for the other. If I notice that you have no faith or a weak faith, I can ask God to give you a strong faith.”⁵

The Christian faith knows nothing of “solitary religion,” according to John Wesley. No one can become or remain a Christian alone. The “communion of saints” nurtures new birth; it baptizes one into Christ. Our early Baptist forebears determined that one should not perform self-baptism. Today we must remember that we cannot serve God alone.

What form should the “priesthood of the believer” take today in our Baptist life?

First, resistance to authoritarian pastoral leadership is crucial.

Second, freedom of biblical interpretation must be maintained.

Third, we must declare an openness to God's calling of persons according to Spirit-giftedness, not according to gender.

Fourth, liberty of conscience about moral/political issues is at the center of Baptist life.

Fifth, confidence that you as an individual (*coram deo*) before God can receive direction from God gives proper dignity to all the baptized.

Sixth, we must affirm shared ministry in the church; church staff members cannot possibly be priests to all members of the congregation that need their care. All believers must share in the pastoral care of the flock.

Finally our world needs some priests; it longs for persons who can speak to God for those who have not yet learned how.

Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that true ministry is not power over others but the empowerment of others.⁶ I believe that if we were to reclaim this foundational doctrine that we might truly be the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

¹Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 290ff.

²Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Broadman Press: 1988), p. 96.

³Ibid.

⁴Richard J. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 150ff.

⁵D. Martin Luthers Werke. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. (Weimar: Bohlau, 1833-), 10/3, pp. 308-309.

⁶*Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 207.

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“The Call to Faithfulness”

by Brian L. Harbour

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Who are we? And why are we here? Somewhere on our lonely journey between two hospitals—the hospital in which we were born and the hospital in which we will die—we need to find an answer to those basic questions of life.

Our text provides an answer to those questions, a simple answer which in different forms and different shapes is declared all the way through the Bible.

Who are we? Listen to what the Bible says in verse 1: “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

There are two key words here: **servants** and **stewards**.

The word **servant** is *huperetas* which means under-rowers. Picture a group of men on a boat, each with an oar in his hand, and the captain of the group standing at the end of the boat, giving orders to row.

Here is the picture the word **servant** paints for us. Christ is the captain of the boat. We are the ones who have the oars. We are under-rowers, men and women working under the command of Christ, to move the boat of His kingdom forward.

The word **steward** is *oikonomos* which means house-servant. This is the person who managed the household under the supervision of the owner of the house. He had a great deal of power, a great deal of authority, and all of the owner's resources at his disposal. But he had to wield that power and use that authority and manage those resources under the supervision of the owner.

Here is the picture the word **steward** paints for us. Christ is the owner of the house. He puts us in charge of certain parts of the house and provides the resources we need to do our job. But we are accountable to Him, and we must work under His supervision.

That's who we are as Christians: men and women to whom God has given a responsibility and to whom God has also given the resources to carry out that responsibility, servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

All Christians are included in that description, men as well as women, pastors as well as deacons, leaders of super churches as well as bivocational pastors, Ph.D.'s as well as those with no degree. All of us are included in that description. The ground is level not only at the cross but also in the servant's quarters. We are all servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

But there is this second question. As servants and stewards of God, why are we here? Or to ask the question in another way, what does God expect of us?

We have an answer to that question in verse 2. Listen to what Paul said: “In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” The Greek word here, *pistos*, is more accurately translated with our word “faithful.”

That's what God requires of us as His servants and stewards. He requires that we be “faithful.” What a tremendous thought!

God doesn't require that we be *successful*. Isn't that great?

We are living in a world that is enamored with success. So much have we come to worship success that when we are not on the top of the heap, when we are not number one, we convince ourselves that we are not worth anything at all.

But the Bible does not say that God requires us to be successful. He only requires that we be “faithful.”

God doesn't require that we be *rich*. Isn't that good?

Because of the power inherent in money, we have become convinced in our day that the accumulation of money is to be life's primary venture. So much have we come to worship money that when we do not have as much money as others we feel like they are better than we are.

But the Bible does not say that God requires us to be rich. He only

requires that we be "faithful."

God doesn't require that we be *talented*. Isn't that wonderful?

How envious we become of those super talented people who seem to be able to do everything. They can teach. They can sing. They are able to lead a group. They are quick witted and personable. How many times do we draw back in the presence of these multi-talented people and say to ourselves, "There's really not much I can do for God."

But the Bible does not say that God requires us to be talented. He only requires that we be "faithful."

God doesn't require that we be *intelligent*. Isn't that encouraging?

All around us today are people who seem to be Einstein reincarnated. Mention a subject and they know about it. Mention a problem and they have a solution for it. These high IQ people sometimes so intimidate us that we refuse to say anything for fear of showing our ignorance.

But the Bible does not say that God requires us to be intelligent. He only requires that we be "faithful."

First Corinthians 4:2 is one of the most encouraging, uplifting, thrilling verses in all the Bible, because it reminds us that the thing God requires of us is something that all of us can do.

Not all of us are successful. Not all of us are rich. Not all of us are talented. Not all of us are intelligent. But all of us can be faithful.

"It is required of stewards that one be found faithful." What marvelous news that is!

But what does it mean to be faithful? Let me make some simple suggestions.

BEING YOU

First of all, being faithful means being you.

In one of His stories, Jesus focused on this aspect of faithfulness. The story is found in Matthew 25. It is the well known parable of the talents.

Jesus told of a man who was going on a journey, so he entrusted his possessions to three of his servants. To one servant he gave 5 talents, to another 2 talents, and to another 1 talent, and then he went on his journey.

When the master returned from His journey, it was time for the servants to give an accounting of their lives.

The one to whom five talents were given invested his five talents and brought back to the master five talents more, ten in all.

The one to whom two talents were given invested his two talents and brought back to the master two talents more, four in all.

The one to whom one talent was given was afraid to do anything so he did not invest it at all. Consequently, he returned to the master only the one talent he had been given.

You remember the response of the master to the servant who did not invest his talent. The master said, "You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents. . . . And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 26-28, 30).

Do you remember the response the Master made to the other two servants?

The response to the five talent servant who brought back ten is found in verse 21: "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master."

The response to the two talent servant who brought back four is found in verse 23: "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

Did you notice something about those two messages of praise? They were identical. They were exactly the same. To the servant who brought ten talents back and to the servant who brought four talents back Jesus gave the same word of praise. Why? Because God does not require that we be the best, only that we be *our* best. He only requires that we be faithful with what we have.

Faithfulness does not mean accomplishing as much as other Christians. It means accomplishing as much as you can with the talents you have been given.

Faithfulness does not mean being like other Christians. It means being true to the person God has made you to be.

We are living in a day when a great deal of pressure is being put upon us to act, think, talk, and believe just like everyone else. Faithfulness means refusing to sacrifice your individuality to the party line. It means being you.

STAYING TRUE

But there is more. Faithfulness not only means being you. It also means staying true.

Daniel illustrated in his life this kind of faithfulness. What a man Daniel was! He was one of the young men of Israel who was taken away into Babylonian captivity. Very quickly, however, he emerged from the crowd and distinguished himself as a person of unique character. So much was the limelight on Daniel that all of the other young princes in the court became jealous of him. In a desire to undermine his power, they sought to find some flaw in his character, some skeleton in his closet.

But listen to what the Bible says in Daniel 6:4: "Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful."

Faithfulness means that you are committed to what is right and not just to what is convenient. It means that you have integrity.

We are living in a day in the Southern Baptist Convention when the end justifies the means. But faithfulness means refusing to sacrifice your integrity for personal advancement. It means staying true.

SEEING IT THROUGH

Notice this third thought. Faithfulness not only means being you and staying true. It also means seeing it through.

Clarence Jordan was a man of unusual abilities and commitment. He had two Ph.D.s, one in agriculture and one in Greek and Hebrew. He was so gifted that he could have done just about anything he chose to do. What he chose to do was to serve the poor in Christ's name.

In the 1940's he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, and called it Koinonia Farm. It was a community for poor whites and poor blacks where they could farm the land and live together.

There was as you might imagine strong resistance from the citizens of the area. They tried everything they could to stop Clarence Jordan. They boycotted him. They slashed his workers' tires when they came to town. For fourteen years, they relentlessly opposed and harassed him.

Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan decided to make one more push and get rid of Clarence Jordan and his Koinonia Farm. They came in the middle of the night with guns and torches. They set fire to every building on Koinonia Farm except for Clarence's home which they practically destroyed with bullets. They chased off all the families except one black family which refused to leave.

Clarence recognized the voice of one of the Klansmen to be the local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter came out to see what remained of the farm. The rubble still smoldered, and the land was scorched. The reporter found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting.

The newspaper reporter said, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting. The reporter kept prodding, kept poking, trying to get a rise from this quietly determined man who seemed to be planting instead of packing.

Finally, with a haughty voice, the man said, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them Ph.D.s and you've put fourteen years into this farm and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been."

Clarence stopped hoeing, turned toward the reporter with his penetrating eyes, and said quietly but firmly: "Sir, I don't think you understand us Christians. What we are about is not success. What we are about is faithfulness."

We are living a day in the Southern Baptist Convention when we seem to be more concerned with success than with faithfulness. Some who are in difficult situations are getting discouraged. Some who do not experience the success others do are dropping out.

But I want to say to you today, we are not about success. We are about faithfulness. And faithfulness means being you, and staying true, and seeing it through.

And the Bible says, **"It is required of servants that they be found faithful."**

For release after 1:45 PM, Monday, June 12, 1989

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and Duke University, Durham, N.C., and was president of International Baptist Seminary, Zurich, Switzerland. He is a graduate of Baylor University, Waco, Tex., and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Tex.

"The Kingdom of the Eighth Child"

by Clyde E. Fant

On the wall in my office I've got two rows of the original photographs of some preachers in *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*. The only problem is, it's tough to keep eight preachers straight—particularly when they jump every time somebody slams the office door.

Anyway, when I came in last week Walter Rauschenbusch was leaning to the left. (That, however, probably wouldn't seem unusual to most observers.) But when I took a closer look, I discovered that he only appeared to be leaning to the left. Actually, Phillips Brooks was leaning to the right.

But with all the talk these days about preachers to the left and right, liberal and conservative preachers, that's really not what we're interested in. What we really want to know is what God wants said. What is gospel and what is not? What is proclamation of the Word and what is propaganda of the system?

The early church struggled with that too. The prologue to the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and what God was, the Word was. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." So far, so good.

"Word" was a familiar concept to Jews and Greeks alike, although in a radically different way. For the Jews, Word meant the Law, the Torah. By the first century the rabbis believed that the Law was virtually co-existent with God, pre-existent before the foundation of the world. In fact, they said, God studied the Torah as the blueprint for the creation of the world. Even Messiah, when he came, would say nothing of himself but would only interpret the Law of Moses. The Greeks, on the other hand, particularly the Stoics, understood the Word as a life principle in the universe to be discovered by each individual through reason, the ultimate self-actualization of the individual, a truth that became "God-forme."

But the Gospel of John took this Word, this *Logos*, and did an amazing and daring thing; that is, to unite it with a Word undesirable to Jews and Greeks alike: *Sarx*, flesh. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father . . . and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was passed on by Moses, but grace and truth were embodied by Jesus Christ." (John 1:14-17) The Word is not merely "passed on" by Jesus—as the Law was passed on by Moses—but the Word *is* Jesus. The glory of God is visible in Jesus, even in his temporal flesh, as he "tabernacled" ("tented") among us (John 1:14); just as the Tabernacle in the wilderness was temporal, yet it held the glory of God.

So John boldly declares that the Word is neither the letter of the law of the Jews nor the mysticism of the moment of the Greeks. It is neither the fixation and objectification of God as in the Torah, nor the abstraction and subjectification of God as by the Stoics. But in one unique Person, the Word took on flesh and blood; in the humility of the limitations of life, we can see the fullness of God in the human face of Jesus, the carpenter from Galilee. That is the message of the Gospel of John.

But if anything, John did his work too well. For by the time of the writing of 1st John, the problem had reversed itself. Now it was not the fullness of God in Jesus of Nazareth that was doubted, but the fullness of humanity in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So John must say: "That which was from the beginning"—the Word—"which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 John 1:1-3). In other words, Jesus was flesh and blood, the realest person who had ever lived. But the humanity of Jesus had proved too much a stumbling block to the philosophical speculations of the Greeks, but also to the Torahlogical speculations of the Jews. The Word cannot take on flesh, they were saying. But in Jesus, Word and flesh are inseparably bound.

That has profound meaning for the preaching of the Gospel. And, I believe, it speaks to the very heart of the things that divide us today. What is our identity as preachers? Is it not the identity of disciples? And are we not disciples and servants of Jesus of Nazareth? And is not the master greater than the servant? Then his Gospel must be our gospel; our proclamation must be His proclamation. But what is that? The title of

humility, "Son of Man," lends a clue; but the title of honor, "Son of David," may provide the key to the true proclamation of Jesus.

Do you remember how David was chosen? God said to Samuel, How much longer will you sulk over the rejection of Saul? Go to the house of Jesse of Bethlehem; this time I will pick out a king.

So Samuel reviewed the sons of Jesse. And when he saw the first son, Eliab, he made the same mistake he made the first time. He was sure this tall, powerful son was God's man. But God said, You've got to quit thinking like that. Don't pay any attention to how tall he is or how fantastic he will look as your leader, because the Lord doesn't see things the way people do. People are always deciding things by looking on the outside, but I decide things by looking on the inside.

So seven sons pass in review, and seven sons are rejected. And Samuel says, Are you sure you haven't got any more kids? And Jesse says, Well, yes; but he's just a little guy tending sheep. Samuel says, Go get him; we're not going home till he comes. And the Lord said, O.K., this is the one. What are you waiting for?

Ah, Lord, he's waiting for what we're all waiting for: the one who is obviously a winner, the one with lots of experience and plenty of notches on his Bible—or wherever—somebody recommended out of Jerusalem, an heir designate, a fair-haired boy (and we do mean boy).

But David was a nobody, an eighth child. And when he fled from Saul, hid in the caves, and lived off the land—even serving as a mercenary with the Philistines!—he was the ultimate *Habiru*—Hebrew—a wandering nuisance, a political exile, an outsider chosen by God to be an insider, a man of the tribes picked to be a man of the monarchy. That's why Israel loved him so, warts and all. He subverted the system; he came from the nobodies below, not the hierarchy above. In David God had set up the kingdom of the eighth child.

And what's that got to do with Jesus, much less you and me? It shows us how grace and humanity have been bound together from the first; and how, if the folks in Jesus' time had had eyes to see, they could have known that the kingdom God intended was to be given, not inherited; and not given to the people who played their spiritual cards right and voted for the winner in every election, but to God's people, even the least child, even the eighth child. And unless we all repent and become like children and stop acting like monarchs-in-waiting, we shall not see the Kingdom of heaven, not in our solemn assemblies, not in our grand churches, and not in our lonely lives.

For there is no mistaking the proclamation of Jesus: like David, he too was nobody. "We know you; you're the carpenter's son. You've got callouses on your hands. You're a nobody out of nothing." Like David, he too identified with the tribe, the marginalized, rather than with the system and the state. That's why he picked twelve disciples, a subversive act to identify with the ancient tribes rather than the Jerusalem system; twelve men as obvious symbols of the twelve sons of Jacob (which is far more likely the reason they were all men than some gender preference on the part of Jesus). So the common people heard him gladly and loved him, as they loved David; and children and beggars, the nobodies of that kingdom, know him as the son of David. "Are you the One?" John the Baptizer, already good as dead, asks him. "You decide," Jesus says. "The lame are walking, the blind are seeing, and good news is being preached to the poor."

That is the first mark of the preaching of Jesus, whether then or now: it is inclusive. That's why it was so subversive. Even sinners would be admitted to the kingdom by the free grace of God; the elaborate rites of the system were finished. And his dramatic action at the Temple was far more than a cleansing; it was an attack on a system that polluted the only part of the Temple accessible to Gentiles: "My father's house shall be called a house of prayer for all people, but you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11:17).

His rejection at Nazareth also came because he preached a gospel that reminded them that God's grace was far wider than their narrow nationalism. When he preached that God had saved a starving widow from Sidon and healed a leprosy Syrian army captain when Israel was full of lepers and starving widows, they rioted. God only blesses our system, they cried; that's Biblical!

And he never overlooked an outcast, this Jesus, whether a prostitute in the dust or a tax collector in a tree. He scandalized the pious of Israel by his dinner companions and his devoted disciples, including many women who followed him to the last, when even the boastful, macho fisherman had deserted him. And those women, who had followed him all the way from Galilee, anointed his broken body as a thank offering for his life.

His first followers didn't misunderstand that inclusiveness either. Philip, on the first missionary journey, baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. A black man, barred from the Temple by his disfigurement, and reading

what had to have been an illegally procured scroll of the Scriptures, was included in the fellowship of Jesus; for this fulfilled the amazing saying of Isaiah which Jesus quoted in the cleansing of the Temple:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";
and let not the eunuch say,
"Behold, I am a dry tree."

For thus says the Lord:

"To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
which shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—

these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered." (Is. 56:3-8)

Jesus rejected the exclusive, restrictive standards of Second Temple Judaism, the restrictions of Ezra and Nehemiah and the Chronicler, and embraced the liberal inclusiveness of Jonah and Ruth. And in his genealogy stand the names of women who were whispered-about outsiders: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. Even prostitutes and tax collectors, Jesus said to the self-righteous, shall enter the Kingdom before you. And the Book of Revelation says, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come,' and let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And if you are thirsty, come. Let the one who desires take the water of life *without price*." (Rev. 22:17) That is inclusive grace, and that is the preaching of Jesus.

The preaching of Jesus, whether then or now, is also marked by a dogged faith in God. And that means risk in life. To trust God, as Jesus did, and Stephen did, and Paul did, is not to have insurance against calamities in life. One of them, remember, was crucified, one was stoned, and one carried a thorn in his flesh for which he had earnestly prayed, only to receive the answer, "My grace is enough."

But that is not an answer appreciated any more now than then. After all, if we face the same risk as others, what good is faith? If we endure hard pews and fuzzy preaching, and even give a Levite's tithe, where's the payoff? And many and many a preacher cannot pass up the very temptations that Jesus refused in the wilderness, to give the people what they want: For wants, bread! For proof, spectacle! For frustration, power! And then when hundreds stream into their preaching palaces, they cry, "See! Look at the response! Look at the size of our churches! The greatest since Pentecost! God must be in it!" Careful, careful; hear again the words of the Lord to Samuel about Eliab, the rejected son of Jesse: "Stop deciding whether the Lord is in it on the basis of size and appearance! (But I'll give you three or four thousand years to work on that, because you'll need it!)"

So Paul is ridiculed by the "super-apostles" of Corinth (II Cor. 11:5, 12:11)—Paul called them "peddlers of the Gospel" (II Cor. 2:16)—who so prided their spirituality. For the Jews required signs, Paul said—spiritual proof—and the Greeks sought wisdom—rational proof—and the super-apostles provided certainty for both. Their slick performances

and spellbinding oratory provided the emotional satisfaction and rationalistic evidences which the Corinthians craved. Paul, on the other hand, was left with only his human-sounding speech and his word of the cross. And for all their talk about it, Corinthians want no cross—only crowns.

Now today super-apostles seem to be on every channel, if not on every corner. Churches—and denominations—crave a return to success, wealth, power, "excitement." (There is so much talk about "excitement" in our churches that the first and great commandment must be, "Be excited!" And the Great Commission must have been changed to, "Go into all the world and get them excited.") And what is exciting is to get what you want: to prosper in life, and to have certainty for every decision of life. The Bible is turned into a pack of spiritualists' Tarot cards to direct the future. One leader said he decided to leave the mission field and take a position at home because he opened his Bible and saw the verse, "Look not on the former things," and he knew God was telling him to end his work there. The preaching of such certainty always produces excitement.

But this preaching is truly worldly and makes null and void the preaching of the cross, the preaching that incurs the hostility of conventional wisdom and powerful, absolute systems; the preaching that may even lead to rejection, to a twisting body on somebody's cross.

But how much richer the preaching of Jesus, that finally is joyous and life affirming. It is a world where the Lord of life takes time to see a wildflower in a field and says, with a little grin, "Even Solomon never had clothes like that!" And who stops along a crowded street, with pushing crowds of working people and soldiers hurrying off God-knows-where to do God-knows-what, and to the puzzlement of his disciples stares at his feet a long while. And they see that his sad eyes are fixed on a dead sparrow, a twisted, trampled fluff of feathers; and with eyes half-filled with tears, he says, "God never misses seeing one of those, you know." No wonder the common people heard him gladly.

It's a real world, the world of the preaching of Jesus, full of pain and death but also of joy and life. A world where he called himself the bridegroom, and so joined in life's celebration that they slandered him by calling him a glutton and a winebibber. But his only excess was insisting on the sparkling ferment of the new wine of the Gospel rather than the sugary flatness of a Welch's religion. That is also our preaching, my sisters and brothers in Christ. And if that is treason, let us make the most of it.

In the movie, *Field of Dreams*, a touching parable is told about life and death and reconciliation and forgiveness. The main character is driven to find an old doctor who had been a big league baseball player in his youth but who had only gotten in for one play before his career ended. The rest of his life was spent as a small town doctor whose love and caring were legendary. He is offered a chance to return, magically, to his youth and to re-enter the big leagues, to be the star his talent had promised. But he refused.

"But you only got to play five minutes in the big leagues," he is told. "That's a tragedy!"

"No," he replies, "If I had only gotten to be a doctor for five minutes, that would have been a tragedy."

We are not called, you and I, to the big leagues, to the lights and the throngs and the cheers, as the "boys of summer." We are called to be shepherds of God's flock—sometimes a scattered and independent flock—ministers and servants of God. "Do you love me?" Jesus said to Simon. "Feed my sheep. You think I know you love me because you are an impetuous water-walking wonder," Jesus was saying, "and a big man in a crowd. But I don't need the most impressive or the biggest as my servant—ask David. I need somebody who can feed lambs as well as sheep. I need a shepherd child."

So that's what we're heir to, thank God: the kingdom of the eighth child. It was enough for Jesus. And it's enough for us.

Amen.