

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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“THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE FACE OF CHRIST”

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Our class on “Reading the Gospels” operates on the premise that reading any one of the gospels is enriched by reading it alongside the other three gospels. Allowing two or three or four of the gospels to interact with each other always yields fruit. This approach, though, has far greater potential for enriching our reading of the four gospels. For instance, we can also bring the New Testament epistles into consideration and read them with the gospels in mind. We can go back and forth, letting the gospels and the epistles work off of each other so that our reading of each enriches our reading of the other.

One wonderful experience of this in my own reading came about some time ago when I stumbled on a line in the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. As the Apostle unpacks a bit of the history of God’s revelation of himself in the opening chapters of that epistle, Paul observes that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Cor. 4.6). The great Creator God, who created light in the beginning, now enlightens our hearts by giving us knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

I submit to you that this verse offers an excellent window through which to view the Gospels. It suggests that those who walked with Jesus gained knowledge of the glory of God as they looked into the face of Christ, and we who come along much later can do the same. Though we were not present 2,000 years ago, we can read the gospel accounts

through the eyes of those who were. In this way we too can look into his face and gain knowledge of the glory of God.

When you read the gospels, then, consider asking questions such as the following.

- What did people see when they looked into the face of Jesus?
- What did they understand about him as they looked into his face, and what did they struggle to understand?
- How did they come to see God’s glory in the face of Christ?

Through questions such as these we will be able to put the Apostle’s comment to work, and it just might lead to fresher, deeper readings of very familiar texts. The Gospels are the revelation of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. We do well to read them in order to gain that knowledge and see that glory.

“*Though we were not present 2,000 years ago, we can read the gospel accounts through the eyes of those who were.*”

When we move from II Corinthians to the gospels, we are not surprised to find that the gospel writers share Paul’s way of thinking. Most notably, the Apostle John draws our attention to the revelation of God’s glory in Christ from the very beginning of his Gospel. As he lays out the mystery

of the incarnation of the Word of God, John writes, “And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1.14). In this large sweeping statement John focuses our attention on the way that Jesus manifested the glory of God

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by revealing God’s grace and truth. God is true and God is gracious. Herein lies his glory, and that glory is revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the truth, and in him the grace and mercies of God have been poured out.

Only one chapter later, the Gospel of John records the miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. This is the occasion on which Jesus changed water into wine. Still waiting for John the Baptist to conclude his ministry before stepping out publicly, Jesus did this reluctantly, but he did it nonetheless. He honored both his mother, who had made the request, and the wedding party whose marriage he and his disciples celebrated. Strikingly, especially with II Corinthians 4.6 ringing in our ears, John concludes his brief account of Jesus’ wedding gift by noting, “This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” (Jn. 2.11) They beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus and trusted him.

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As one begins to reflect on the idea of the glory of God in the face of Christ, moments such as the transfiguration of Jesus, when his countenance quite literally and visibly revealed a heavenly glory, will probably come most readily to mind. On that occasion Jesus’ face literally shone with the glory that had belonged to him as the pre-incarnate Son of God, and the Gospel writers strain to find words to capture this reality. Luke observes that “his face became different, and his clothing became white and gleaming” (Lk. 9.29). Mark tells us, “his garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (Mk. 9.3). Matthew tells us that, “his face shone like the sun” (Mt. 17.2). Obviously, in this moment Jesus’ followers gained knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ, and Paul’s comment certainly brings such moments to mind.

As one explores this idea in the Gospels, however, it becomes apparent that the greater glory of God appeared not through visually spectacular moments such as the transfiguration but through the more mundane manifestations of the character of God in Christ. It is in the revelation of God’s character that we encounter the greater glory in the face of Christ. It is in the more common experiences of Christ, then, that his followers gained

knowledge of the glory of God as they beheld the character of God: the power and wisdom and holiness and love and grace and mercy and even humility of God in the face of Christ.

This all becomes apparent even in the disciples’ experience of Christ’s transfiguration. While the visual spectacle captured their attention, they encountered the greater glory not in the visible luminescence of their Lord or even in the voice from heaven that put them face down in the dirt but in the simple, comforting touch of their Lord’s hand on their shoulder at the end of the whole episode. The gospel of Matthew records that

after the heavenly voice had spoken and the disciples had gone face down in the dirt, “Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid’” (Mt. 17.7). Though they may not have even realized it at the time, it was in this simple touch and in this word of encouragement that the disciples encountered the greater glory of God. They looked up into the reassuring face of Jesus and

saw there the glory of God in the face of Christ. They saw a comforting face that revealed the love and the patience and even the humility of God. For a few moments the three disciples had gotten a reality check regarding both the terrifying glory that belonged to Jesus and the remarkable humility he was showing in giving that glory up.

Admittedly, to speak of the humility of God sounds odd. It just doesn’t seem right to speak of God as humble, and yet this is exactly the right way to speak. In Jesus Christ, God humbles himself. As we look into the face of Jesus, then, we see the glory of the humility of God revealed, and we gain knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. This is what happened on the mount of transfiguration when Jesus reassured his disciples, and Jesus’ followers experienced this sort of thing over and over again. The Father shined his light into their hearts, enlightening them with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Nowhere does the glory of the humility of God in Christ come through more clearly than in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Consider, specifically, the account that Luke gives us

in chapter two of his Gospel. If you haven't read Luke 2.1-20 lately, take a moment to read it and then ask your self a couple questions. First, Who looked into the face of the baby Jesus in this account? Second, What did they see? Most obviously the answer to the first question includes Mary and Joseph, but there were others too, such as the shepherds who gathered around the feed trough where the baby lay and the angels who looked down from the heavenly places. When we ask, What did they see? Once again the answer is fairly straightforward. They saw a little Jewish baby boy. We do not know the exact weight or length, but we have every reason to think he looked pretty much like any other little Jewish baby born that year.

When we get to the questions of what the onlookers understood about this baby and what they struggled to understand, however, the answers become more intriguing. Reflect for a moment on the contrast between what Mary understood as she gazed into that little face and what the angels in heaven understood as they looked on from their more distant vantage point. Mary understood better than anyone that this little baby was exactly that—a little baby. She had just given birth to him. She knew he was the genuine article. There were inexplicable mysteries surrounding her son's conception, but the baby himself was clearly the real article. He was a little boy—her little boy, and he was as needy and dependent on his mother as any other little baby born before or since.

What Mary struggled to understand was what else he was. Given the mysterious and miraculous nature of the conception of this child, she knew he was something more. In fact, according to Luke's account, she knew that his name was to be Jesus, that he would be great, that he would be called the Son of the Most High, and that the Lord God would give him the throne of his father David. Most remarkably, while the conception would always remain a mystery to her, she knew that the Holy Spirit had come upon her, that the power of the Most High had overshadowed her, and that her child would not only be called son of Mary but Son of God (Luke 2.35). "Son of God"—what could that possibly mean?

The angels faced the opposite problem. As they looked down on that little town of Bethlehem and kept "their watch of

wondering love,"¹ they understood quite clearly that the baby in the feed trough was, in fact, the Son of God. They saw the empty throne at the right hand of the Father. They knew that the eternal Word had descended to earth to take on flesh. They knew this much very clearly. What staggered their imagination even as they looked on was that the one they knew well as the Son of God was now son of a young Jewish girl named Mary. As the Apostle Peter would put it in his own reflections on these mysteries, these were realities that the angels themselves longed to grasp more fully (I Peter 1.12).

While it is tempting to be jealous of Mary and Joseph and of the shepherds and angels, we who come later do enjoy the benefit that follows from letting these different perspectives mingle. In fact, when we allow the viewpoint of the angels to intersect with the perspective of Jesus' mother, we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus more fully than any of them could have. We see the glory of the character of God revealed. Here we see the love and grace and mercy, and most clearly, the fullness of the humility of God. In the moment of Christ's birth we can stand alongside Mary and join the angels as they strain to grasp what it

could mean for the Creator on whom all things depend to render himself so totally dependent on the care of his young mother.

Look into the face of the baby Jesus and consider the staggering glory of a God who humbles himself. Apparently, the Lord God had previously taken on a very temporary human form to appear on earth ever so briefly², but in Jesus God takes on

an actual human nature. Still more remarkably, he chooses to enter our world not as a fully formed adult, independent and in control. He chooses to come into this world as all of us have come, by way of conception and birth, dependent, vulnerable, and needy. And as if this were not enough, he does not come in regal splendor but in poverty, born not in a palace and placed in a gilded crib but in a stable and laid in a feed trough. This is the humility of God. This is the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Surely these particularities of the birth, on top of the very notion of incarnation, staggered the angelic imagination. Where they expected to hear the sound of trumpets and drums they heard the snorting and grunting of livestock. Where they expected the

“ When we allow the viewpoint of the angels to intersect with the perspective of Jesus' mother, we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus more fully than any of them could have.”

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silks and satins of royalty they discovered the course swaddling cloths of poverty. Where they would have anticipated making a public and spectacular introduction for the Prince of Heaven, they settled for sharing their secret with a few shepherds outside the obscure little town in which he was born. This is the humility of God. This is the glory of God in the face of Christ.

These are the mysteries on which the writers of carols have reflected to our benefit. Look again at the lyrics of “Once in Royal David’s City” or “What Child is This?” Consider as well a couple lesser-known carols such as this one written by Frank Houghton.

“Thou who wast rich beyond all splendor
All for love’s sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
sapphire paved courts for stable floor.”³

What caught the attention of Frank Houghton in the 19th century captured Martin Luther’s attention a few centuries earlier.

“Once did the skies before thee bow;
a virgin’s arms contain thee now:
angels who did in thee rejoice
now listen for thine infant voice.”⁴

Happily, Martin Luther wrote more than one hymn, and we do well to let him and many others direct our gaze toward the manger.

My daughter just gave birth to our first grand child, so the reality of a seven-pound infant is once again overwhelming me. The utter dependence and neediness of a newborn child has become apparent all over again. My wife calls these little bitty babies “nee-ninies,” and she is right. This is what they are. Birth is

remarkable and overwhelming in every case, but in one case the nee-niny was also the Creator of the universe, and he was born in a barn. I cannot imagine any clearer way for God to declare not only his willingness to humble himself but his insistence on humbling himself for our sake.

“ Look into the face of the
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Luke writes that when the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of the baby Jesus, “the glory of the Lord shone around them,” and they sang “glory to God in the highest” (Lk. 2.9, 14). That heavenly glory overwhelmed the shepherds, we are told, but I submit to you that whether they knew it or not, they observed the greater glory when they found the stable and looked into the face of the

infant. There they saw the glory of the humility of God in the face of Christ.

Whether the shepherds quite grasped this or not, the angels clearly did. They knew where the greater glory lay—no longer in the heavenly places but in a feed trough, in a stable, in Bethlehem, on planet earth. They draw our attention there again today that we might see what they, and Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds saw. And as we turn our gaze in that direction, may the God who said “Let light shine out of darkness,” enlighten our hearts with “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Notes

1. Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” sung to ST. LOUIS C.M.D. irreg.
2. Genesis 18. This appears to be a theophany, or an appearance of God in human form.
3. Frank Houghton, “Thou Who Wast Rich,” sung to a French carol melody.
4. Martin Luther, “All Praise to Thee, Eternal Lord,” sung to CANONBURY L.M.

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POEM FOR ADVENT

“REMEMBERING THAT IT HAPPENED ONCE”

by Wendell Berry

One of the participants in our reading group, in which we have been “Developing a Robust Theology of Vocation,” suggested that this group should include some poetry. I am so glad he pointed us in this direction and glad again that it led us back to Wendell Berry’s A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997. We wholeheartedly recommend this collection of poetry, and as we enter the Christmas season we offer the following poem from this collection in the hope that it will further your own reflections on the birth of the Word of God made flesh.

“Remembering that it happened once,
 We cannot turn away the thought,
 As we go out, cold, to our barns
 Toward the long night’s end, that we
 Ourselves are living in the world
 It happened in when it first happened,
 That we ourselves, opening a stall
 (A latch thrown open countless times
 Before), might find them breathing there,
 Foreknown: the child in the straw,
 The mother kneeling over Him,
 The husband standing in belief
 He scarcely can believe, in light
 That lights them from no source we see,
 An April morning’s light, the air
 Around them joyful as a choir.

We stand with one hand on the door,
 Looking into another world
 That is this world, the pale daylight
 Coming just as before, our chores
 To do, the cattle all awake,
 Our own white frozen breath hanging
 In front of us; and we are here
 As we have never been before,
 Sighted as not before, our place
 Holy, although we knew it not.”

1987, VI, *A Timbered Choir*
 (Counterpoint, 1998), p. 94.

For more of Wendell Berry’s poetry, please have a look at our review of this collection on p. 6 of this edition of *Reconsiderations*.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Counterpoint, 1998)

by Richard V. Horner

As I mention in my introduction to Wendell Berry's poem in this edition of *Reconsiderations*, I wholeheartedly recommend this collection of poetry. I am not a poet, nor do I have a poetic sensibility. I often struggle to read and understand poetry that other better-informed readers laud. Berry, however, is one of those poets that give voice to their readers rather than simply leaving them completely baffled and wondering what the poet is up to. Berry gives us voice and elevates that voice. In the process, he also offers rich reflection and genuine wisdom that I always find inspiring and enriching.

He has contributed a lot to our consideration of faith and vocation this semester. Berry often reflects on human toil in ways that recognize the fundamental goodness of work and that connect it holistically to the Creator and to the creation. Berry lives close to the land in ways that many of us may not be able to do, but his poetry helps keep us far better in tune with the natural rhythms that continue to be central to life, whether we recognize them or not. Berry opens our eyes and ears and senses to the revelatory character of all God's creation.

You can find one of the poems that most caught my own attention on our new blog. "Enclosing the field within bounds" helped launch our discussion of the goodness of boundaries and the importance of setting and recognizing limits. We live in a society that assumes limitlessness is a good thing. Berry does not. But for more on this poem and this theme, visit our blog at <http://christianstudycenter.org/enclosing-the-field-within-bounds> and join the conversation.

Another personal favorite explores the theme of work and seamlessly weaves human work together with the work of God.

"Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.
1979, X

There are so many poems that capture my attention, so many lines that linger in my thoughts long after closing the book. "Great work is done while we're asleep," for instance, continues to resonate day after day. I often tell my students that the most important part of any class I teach does not happen in the classroom while I am talking but in those moments outside of class when with a friend they continue to think or in a quiet moment gain some new insight. Always, the most important work is done by God, who does great work while we're asleep. I find great comfort in this thought, and I know it applies whether planting vegetables or teaching students.

Following the example of the psalmist, who has ears that hear the trees singing, Berry often speaks of "the timbered choir" that gives this collection its name. "Receiving sun and giving shade,/ Their life's a benefaction made,/ And is a benediction said/ Over the living and the dead." Berry knows well the revelatory character of all of nature, and most notably here of the timbered choir. "Downcomings of the distant light;/ They are the advent they await."

A long time married, Berry seems to have written at least an annual poem in honor of his wife and their marriage. An old married man myself, these are also among my favorites. "I go into the one body/ that two make in making marriage/ that for all our trying, all/ our deaf-and-dumb of speech,/ has no tongue." There is no speech, no language adequate, but he dares to use words to point us to this ultimately ineffable reality, and I am so glad he does.

Here is perhaps my very favorite of his musings on marriage.

“Worn to brightness, this
bowl opens outward
to the world, like
the marriage of a pair
we sometimes know.
Filled full, it holds
Not greedily. Empty,
It fills with light
That is Heaven’s and
Its own. It holds
Forever for a while.”
1995, III

In the end Berry knows that it is not only marriage that leads to speechlessness. It is all of life, lived before God. It is God himself. As he observes, “The way of love leads all ways/ to life beyond words, silent/ and secret.” Most of us, however, need words to lead us to that place of silence, so again I commend Berry to you. He does wonderfully well at using words to give us eloquent voice and finally to render us speechless in that place of profound and sacred silence to which he often points.

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If you have not found CSC Interchange, be sure to find it on our web site and join the conversation. Recent blog posts include reflections on limits and boundaries and "A Prophetic Word from the Misfit" for Advent. We welcome your contributions.





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