
7. Theologian at Work

Theological Ethics

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A theological analysis of a particular congregation must proceed in two directions. In the first place, the "documents" of the congregation, living and written, available to the theologian must be examined in order to determine the present, concrete working understanding that the congregation has of itself. This analysis should make transparent the purpose of the congregation as it is articulated and understood by the members. This should be followed by an analysis of the institutional practices of the congregation in order to determine whether, in fact, the lived reality of the community conforms to the expressed understanding of itself. In this way the congregation determines whether or not its intentions as a community are adequately expressed in the organization of the congregation and the functions of its ministry.

Second, the theological analyst must examine the self-understanding of the congregation together with its practice in light of broader convictions about the nature and purpose of the church. Utilizing an explicit understanding of the nature of the congregation based on interaction with the biblical and theological sources, the analyst becomes an external critic, raising questions about the adequacy of the congregation's self-understanding in light of the universal theological dialogue in the church about the mission and ministry of the church as the body of Christ in the world. Theological analysis has this normative function: It calls the church into account to be faithful to its covenant with God and to respond creatively to the promises of God for the church and the world.

THE THEOLOGICAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF WILTSHIRE CHURCH

At the very beginning of the analysis of the theological perspective of the Wiltshire congregation, it is interesting to note that the pastor of the church does not think there is any theological understanding among the members at all. They are "biblically illiterate" for the most part and agnostic about many matters of faith. They are "wistful hearts" who wish they could believe. They come to church largely for the purpose of gaining insight and inspiration to enable them better to cope with the pressures of family and corporate life. A leading layman summarizing a board discussion adds the observation that the congregation is a group of people who profess belief in Christ but really have only a nominal or limited belief in his teachings. He noted that there are few demands placed on persons who wish to become part of the congregation and that the primary focus of the life of the church is on the needs of those who are part of that church.

The material available to me and the conversations I have had with observers of the congregation indicate that this is a fairly accurate picture of the theological state of affairs at Wiltshire. Considerably more specificity can be given to the congregation's self-understanding from various interviews and questionnaires provided by church members. Taken together, a profile of faith emerges.

God

The idea of God characteristic of the congregation is very vague, but a relatively large number do believe in a God related to them personally. For example, almost half the respondents to a questionnaire indicated that they had experienced God "speaking to them" and their situation. However, half of the members did not experience God speaking to them in this way, and only a third of the respondents even asked for God's guidance in a time of crisis. There is little evidence that those who experienced God speaking to them really expect intervention in any noticeable way into their lives. God is mostly a source of comfort and a source of inspiration, a sort of coping hypothesis. "There must be some-

thing higher than ourselves.” God is the name of courage, perseverance, and strength—all resources found within the self. This is perhaps the so-called spark of the divine within each human being mentioned often by the respondents. The divine person is not experienced as the holy, one who governs, judges, and redeems, though there are some who are seeking more clarity about the “holy.” The notion of God at Wiltshire is far from the God of the Reformed tradition who inspires awe and wonder. God is rather the “urge to go on,” “the inspiration to do right,” and a kind of “presence” that one feels within oneself. This idea of God is not tied in any special way to a clear biblical understanding of God, although there is a curious anomaly here. Although a third of the people say God “speaks” most clearly in the words of the Bible, they have very little enthusiasm for biblical study. In fact, there is not even much interest in having the minister know more about the Bible.

Jesus

Jesus is not perceived to be the revelation of God except in the sense that Jesus reveals the “spark of the divine” more fully than other men. Jesus has much in common with other great leaders. He functions primarily as a moral example for uplifting the sight of human beings and inspiring them to take new courage and new hope. Even the most significant parts of the Easter message become transformed into inspiration for human trust and love and the possibility for overcoming loneliness.

Jesus is seen as a particular kind of moral example. He does not challenge the present order in the name of a coming kingdom. Rather, the Jesus of Wiltshire Church is the one who reflects those survival virtues necessary for the people of Wiltshire themselves. He is the one who loves children, who fearlessly does what he thinks is right, who exhibits courage and honor and good sportsmanship. He is not a model of personal piety. He is the one who forgives mistakes and then denounces those who condemn persons who exhibit minor moral improprieties. Though there is strong agreement that Jesus “saves from sins,” that salvation results in no change of world view. It is simply the result of follow-

ing Jesus' example and forgiving ourselves and then forgiving each other.

In other words, the story of Jesus is the prime example of a person who cared about other people and who stuck to his principles through everything. He did not challenge Caesar. Caesar killed him. Yet Jesus was decisive, intentional, and held his honor. At the end, he could be at peace with himself.

The Nature of the Church's Ministry

The Wiltshire congregation gives a very high priority to ministry to the suffering. Most respondents to the questionnaire felt that it was terribly important for the pastor to visit the sick and counsel the troubled. They are persons with problems of their own, according to one respondent. These personal and family problems are magnified by the pressures of corporate life and the pressures of upward mobility. The church for them becomes a kind of "sanctuary," a place of refuge from the pressures on their lives, a place for inspiration and solace, assurance and support. A highly transient people caught up in a highly competitive environment, they seek a place to identify with others of like mind. They also seek a source of reassurance and a sense of acceptance in the midst of their doubts about themselves and life in general.

This characterization of the ministry of the church is to be understood as ministry to *this* community, to the suffering and the troubled of *this* church. The respondents reflect little interest in having the church as such involved in ministry beyond the membership of the congregation. This is evident in the overwhelming agreement (with some dissent, of course) that the church should not concern itself with the major social issues of the day. The social ministry of the church should be carried on by inspiring moral concern and courage in individuals who then go out into the world as positive influences for good. This moral inspiration is focused on personal honor and character, not social criticism. Little attention is given to questions of social ethics, such as poverty or militarism.

This understanding of ministry is a reflection of the needs that attracted most people to the town of Wiltshire. The city is referred

to as a "Shangri-la," a retreat from the pressures and stresses of the corporate life. One primary factor in choosing Wiltshire has been its reputation for excellent schools and family living. Wiltshire families want a safe place for their children where they will get the best education possible and where the "atmosphere" of the community inspires them to take advantage of their opportunities. Wiltshire is a haven, a place to escape with one's family from the stresses and dangers of nearby Springfield. One observer noted the "drawbridge mentality," a desire to separate their world from the world they have just left beyond the turnpikes. Yet, Shangri-la is not merely an escape, it is a community filled with like-minded people who are upwardly mobile, ambitious, and decisive. Almost all the newer residents of Wiltshire are in similar income brackets and have growing families for whom community activities are terribly important. As corporate middle-executives, they are also transient and mobile. They do not have time to search out community. It must be there when they arrive. It must be obvious and immediately available. A sense of belonging must come with the territory.

It is therefore not surprising that their sense of ministry is community building for *their* community in *their* church. They want the best music program and the best church school and the best speaker in town. Only the "best show in town" is capable of adequately meeting all their needs, including community, status, and upward mobility.

With so little time to give to any activities other than their own careers and precious moments of recreation and family activities, the people of Wiltshire do not look for a church that makes heavy demands, nor are they, for the most part, eager to probe the depths of personal meaning and faith. Their search for meaning is defined by their vocational choices. It is closely related to the possibility of advancement in a particular corporate setting where they find themselves. This is not to say that there is an absence of interest in the deeper questions of meaning, but they much prefer to have simple, anecdotal, and clear answers to the questions that they face on the practical plane of life. In the words of one respondent, "something we can take home and use during the week." They feel little need for involved and probing discussions of issues

about the ministry of the church or the challenge of the Christian life. They come to church to be served, not to be disciplined. They come to church to receive ministry, not to be ministers.

THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

My brief and admittedly inadequate observation of the practice of the church would indicate that this conception of ministry coheres with the actual life of the congregation. There are study groups for interested adults. Though these rise and fall and usually are not well attended, they are available for those who wish them. For the most part, however, the ministry of the church focuses on three activities—the Sunday school, the regular morning worship service, and the program of enlistment and visitation.

The church school is largely run by laypersons. Most of them are women. They are dedicated teachers and seem to do an exceptional job. The church school has defied recent demographic trends and continues to grow while other church schools decline. This is a tribute to the effort that is invested by leadership and the tremendous support that it receives from the church constituency. If there is an educational program at Wiltshire Church for their children, it will be “the best.” Many people in the Wiltshire congregation firmly believe it to be the best anywhere in the area.

The worship service focuses on the sermon, but almost equally important is the music program. The music program is primarily composed of volunteers with part-time paid singers and a choir director. It is widely conceded in the community that Wiltshire Church has the best music program available, and the congregation is extremely proud of it. The pastor is known as one of the outstanding public speakers in the area. His delivery is flawless and his sermons are filled with practical hints at wisdom. Often there is little in the sermon that is specifically Christian, but the overwhelming majority of the people find the sermons helpful, clear, and on most occasions, inspiring.

The visitation program of the church is largely the program of the pastor. There is little evidence that the congregation engages in enlistment or visitation of the sick on any organized basis. However, the pastor is constantly on call. Many members commended him for his promptness in calling on them when they

came to the community as well as his responsiveness in times of trouble and crisis. Most people felt that the pastor really cared for them.

However, not all is well in Wiltshire. There seems to be growing dissatisfaction, although those who are involved are not clear about the causes of their dissatisfaction. At the present time, most of the discontent has focused on particular actions or recommendations by the minister. There have been charges of lack of confidentiality and of excessive demands on the congregation for his own benefit. Seen from the standpoint of the minister, these charges are preposterous. He believes that the persons responsible for the charges are primarily irritated because they have been removed from the positions of leadership or because he has been hard-nosed about business decisions concerning his future and the future of the church.

This mention of conflict in Wiltshire Church as part of the theological analysis is here simply to indicate that although my basic judgment is that the ministry of Wiltshire Church very clearly coheres with the expectations and theological self-understanding of the congregation and the minister himself, this does not mean that harmony reigns supreme. The conflicts at the present time appear personal and do not reflect widespread theological disagreement about what the church ought to be doing or about the nature of the church and its ministry. On these matters, the pastor and the overwhelming majority of the members seem to agree. The ministry of the church, as carried on by the pastor and under the direction of laity in the church school and music programs, very adequately implements and coincides with the congregation's self-understanding its own nature and task.

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF WILTSHIRE CHURCH

Much of what I have described as the self-understanding of Wiltshire Church is in an abiding tension with the notion of the congregation that arises from an encounter with biblical and theological sources. This tension is analogous to the tension in the life of the individual Christian. The Christian is called by God into fellowship with God and with other Christians, and at the same

time is alienated from God and separated from other persons. In the same way, the congregation is at once the people of God called together to be the body of Christ, a community of reconciliation and redemption for all the world, and at the same time it is a self-centered, exclusive, compromising religious institution that has struggled to accommodate itself to the needs of its culture and to ensure its survival. In other words, this congregation at Wiltshire is no more and no less than human.

Therefore, I avoid any flight of rhetoric toward a "mystical church," "church within the church," or "church incognito," because that would seem to me to be a stubborn manifestation of the refusal to acknowledge that this church, like myself, is what it is only in the mystery of grace alone. It is true that this congregation falls far short of the biblical promises of what the congregation can be, but for all of that, we must remember that it is a community of the people of God. That is the audacious claim they can make and that claim is an expression of hope in God. I therefore begin my theological critique with the statement that this church is the body of Christ. That statement is one of belief in God's promise to be with Wiltshire Church and to be for Wiltshire Church. It is an expression of my expectation that community is, has been, and will be justified by God in her gracious and steadfast love.

Yet, hope in God is not simple flight of fancy, and this church, like others, is called in its confession of hope to be what it has been promised. It is called to struggle to achieve integrity and authenticity as the body of Christ in the world.

The call to integrity and authenticity raises the question of how one proceeds to discover and justify normative criteria for the life of the congregation that do not arise in the self-understanding of the congregation itself. In what sense can a theologian presume to know what this particular congregation ought to be? This important question deserves more attention, but I am limited to suggesting certain directions.

In the first place, if the congregation is the body of Christ in the world, one must have some understanding of the world in which this particular congregation lives. What is the global context of the life of this congregation? What are the issues and problems for

this congregation as a community dedicated to Jesus Christ?

There are, of course, a number of ways in which one can describe the contemporary world. I have chosen three significant components of the global situation that form the content of my perception of the world of Wiltshire Church. In the first place, this is a world of relative isolation of persons from one another. It is, therefore, a world of selfishness and loneliness. Secondly, the global world of Wiltshire Church is a world of extreme poverty. More than 60 percent of the world's peoples live at subsistence level or lower. This is a world of injustice and inequity that confronts Wiltshire Church with these problems. Thirdly, the world in which Wiltshire Church lives is a world living on the edge of time. Its very existence and survival is threatened by environmental destruction. The paradigmatic form of that destruction is the possibility of nuclear warfare, but there are other less obvious trends that point us inexorably in the direction of self-destruction.

If this is a limited but fairly accurate description of the world in which Wiltshire congregation lives, then what are the biblical and theological sources that illuminate the appropriate pattern of life for a community that understands itself to be a church? I propose three affirmatives about the congregation as the body of Christ that shed light on the past problems of Wiltshire Church and offer inspirational promises for the future of this congregation.

1. The Body of Christ Is a Human Community

God became human in Jesus Christ. God became flesh of our flesh. This means that the church as the body of Christ is a human community. It is not just any human community, however. It is a people who are to be with each other in a particular concrete way. Because it knows its Lord is the one to whom and by whom all things are made, it knows itself to be the community that bears the marks of its origin in God's creative act.

What are the marks of the community that is created by God? Karl Barth's discussion of the basic form of humanity is helpful in describing the marks of truly human community. Barth begins with the assumption that there is no question as to whether we shall live in community—that has been decided by creation. We are created irrevocably social. Barth outlines four "levels of hu-

manity" which move progressively closer to the norm of a fully human community that manifests the marks of divine creation.

The first level is what Barth calls eye-to-eye relationships. By this he means the capacity to see each other. Almost paradoxically, he insists that if we are to be with each other in community, we must see and recognize the uniqueness of each one. Only as each one becomes this one or that one does he or she come to be really with us. Otherwise, he or she may be "around" but not with us. To be able to say "I know you by name, I know you by sight" is the first level of humanization in community. However, this must also be a willingness to be seen and to not hide myself from the other. Visibility to each other and seeing each other then constitute the first level. Secondly, there is a necessity for mutual speech and hearing. The obvious need for communication is at the heart of the truly human community. But perhaps it is less obvious that communication as such is constitutive of community, our being together. I literally cannot know who I am unless I hear from you about who I am. And you cannot know who I am unless I will tell you who I am. The same is true for you with respect to my speech and hearing and your own self-understanding. The development of the self is a social phenomenon that involves your speaking to me about my origins and my place in society and my integrating those words in my own way and projecting myself out beyond the previous boundaries set for me by the social world. Thus, my becoming who I am is contingent upon your willingness to speak to me and hear me speak to you. If we are to be "in communion" at any level deeper than the mutual dependence of individual selfhood, then speech and hearing take on further importance. Not only does the community protect my right to speak, but the community has a right to hear what I have to say. As a member of the community, I have the obligation to address the community with genuine and significant speech and thus to participate actively in the growth of community by augmenting authentic communication.

The third level to which Barth refers is mutual assistance. This is a broad-ranging claim upon us. In Christian terms the need of the neighbor becomes the form of God's command for us to act. This is not a program of reform. But armed with sensitivity to

human need, we live ready to assist when a need is discovered. Equally important, we are ready to receive graciously when we are in need. The key again is mutuality. It requires willingness to receive from others and readiness to respond in obedience to assist others in need.

The fourth level of humanity has to do with our attitudinal stance toward community life. Sensitive to the human tendency to become moralistic and deadly serious about doing what must be done, Barth insists that such attitudes deny the humanity we seek. Being together easily becomes a burden that we must bear, a complex network of duties that we fulfill grudgingly and purely for the sake of meeting our own survival needs. The human community created by God, however, is not characterized by drudgery, but by joy and gladness. We are together because in being together we are being who we are and what we are. We come to each other for each other's sake as well as our own, and in that coming together, we recognize that we are becoming ourselves and what we hope to be. In genuine giving and receiving, that which we hope for—human fulfillment in community—becomes a reality for us. The joy of knowing that we are received by others and that they receive us gladly enables us to give, knowing that our gifts will be received in the same joyful mood. We trust the other one, knowing that that other one is trustworthy, and at the same time is trusting us. We are not alone, and we shall not be left alone. We care and we are cared for. Such a life together creates a community of perpetual celebration in which we abandon our inhibitions and exult in the promise and possibility made known by our being with each other.

At this point, it is worth noting that creation, for Barth, is a postcovenantal doctrine. Because the covenant community understands all community to be created by God, and the possibility of community to be a gift of God, it will expect to find many communities that more or less manifest the marks of the divine creative act. Furthermore, the covenant community will make a serious mistake if it sees itself to be somehow "better" than other communities, as if it, too, were not human and did not partake in all of the ambiguity that that implies. The uniqueness of the community of the people of God does not rest in its moral achievement. It resides rather in the fact that it knows a secret—that God's cre-

ative act is the basis for all genuinely human community. The people of God rejoice in community wherever it is found because they know they have discovered more than a human achievement. They have discovered a gift of God.

Knowing that all community is a gift of God means that the community of the people of God will be an open community. Because the community itself owes its existence to a gracious gift, it will be open to new gifts of persons from God into its community. The One whose gift has made their being together possible is the One whose love is fully given to all. Therefore, whosoever desires may come and share the mutual joy, hope, and fulfillment of the congregation. There can be no exclusiveness about the body of Christ. The body of Christ can never become a clique or a closed circle. They will be attentive to the center of their life and not to its boundaries. God is that center and God alone sets the boundaries of the covenant community by her own free choice.

2. The Body of Christ Is a Community for the Poor

God's choice of Israel and of Jesus Christ is a choice of a particular people. In Jesus Christ we know that God has chosen a people for the world, but there is a particular people who were objects of Jesus' special attention and to whom his ministry and his call were especially directed. Jesus Christ became human for the poor.

The church has long understood that Jesus Christ was for the poor, reflected in the historic preoccupation of the church with service to the poor. But, as Gustavo Gutierrez has said, "The poor today, rather than being regarded as merely a 'problem for the church,' raise the question of what 'being the church' really means."¹

Jesus' own understanding of his ministry was characterized by a primary concern for the poor. To illustrate, it is useful to point to a series of significant events reported by Luke. The first was a baptism at which time the title "Son of God" is given to Jesus, and the descent of the spirit upon Jesus is described.

The second event is the temptation in the wilderness. Here

¹Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Poor in the Church," in Julio De Santa Ana, *Toward a Church of the Poor* (New York: Maryknoll, 1981), p. 122.

more New Testament commentators have agreed that from the mouth of Satan came popular notions of messiahship that were in vogue at the time. In each case, a proposal is suggested by Satan. Jesus spurns the proposal with an aphorism from the Scriptures. The fact that the subject matter between Jesus and Satan is really the nature of messiahship is a strong indication that the wilderness period was thought by Luke not only to be a time of temptation but of growing clarity for Jesus about the direction of his ministry. It is not surprising to discover that Luke places Jesus in an active teaching role when he returns from the wilderness.

The third event in the sequence takes on special importance because it is the first return to Nazareth by Jesus after the wilderness experience, which Luke saw as crucial in setting the tone for the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus appeared in a synagogue, he was handed a scroll to read. He chose a familiar passage from Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and the recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Luke then reports that as the eyes of all were fixed on him, Jesus announced that what they heard was fulfilled before them.

This passage clearly has the force of a revolutionary concept of messiahship. It picks up aspects of the most important revolutionary social innovation in Jewish history, the Year of Jubilee, the acceptable Year of the Lord. The legislation establishing the celebration every fifty years included a provision for the canceling of debts, the re-assignment of land to the dispossessed, the freeing of slaves and servants, and the freeing of the land for itself and for nonhuman creatures.

In this cultural context, we can understand why a group of the good citizens of Nazareth tried to push Jesus off the cliff. Jesus had asserted the primacy of concern for the poor in God's creative and messianic relationship to the world. This was said in a cultural milieu that was based on the theological understanding that rich people were the objects of God's special favor. In spite of their position as a colonized people, the Jews within their own ranks associated riches and religiousness, so that to be poor was almost by definition to be a sinner—at least the poor were not

among the truly religious. This convenient theological perspective also undergirded the political alliance of the Sadducees and the Pharisees that finally formed the spearhead of Jewish opposition to Jesus on religious grounds.

What Jesus said at Nazareth turned established theology on its head. Not only were the poor to be included in the covenant people, they were the object of God's special concern. God is God for the poor, and the people of God are the people for the poor—living, working, and moving on their behalf.

Recent New Testament scholarship suggests, however, that this analysis does not go far enough. Not only was Jesus *for* the poor in his ministry, but he called together a community that *was* poor. The community of the people of God is revealed in Jesus Christ as a community of the poor. The community that gathered around Jesus may have been part of the general movement referred to in historical literature as "the piety of the poor." It was a grass-roots protest against the alliance between riches and religiousness that characterized official religion.²

In light of this, wealth became the problem for the followers of Christ. The poor needed no justification, only the rich. This means that the community that is the body of Christ must be becoming a community that is *for* the poor in a peculiar way. Too long the poor have suffered the indignities of paternalism and condescension from the religious rich. The act of giving, even generous giving, has often been a taking-away. What is more, giving has often been a way of keeping a safe, discreet distance. Being *for* the poor means far more.

For one thing, it means being with the poor. The body of Christ will include the poor within it. Where it exists apart from the poor, this fact alone will be a matter of great concern. Within the community of people of God, those who are rich will be profoundly disturbed at their separation from the poor. This concern will manifest itself in a persistent and genuine reaching out for community with the community of the poor.

Secondly, if the congregation is for the poor, it will be for the

²See Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus von Nazareth: Hoffnung der Armen* (Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 1978).

poor even at the risk of itself. The body of Jesus Christ will be and is sacrificed for the poor of the world. The community of that body will be willing to assume whatever risk is necessary and to do those things required to be sure that the poor have good news preached to them—genuine good news that there is new life, new hope, and a new order coming for them.

The poor will know that the community of God's people see them, the poor, as the vanguard of the Year of Jubilee. The signs of the Year of the Lord will be *their* freedom, *their* hopes, and *their* new life. In short, for the body of Christ, progress of the poor out of oppression and captivity is the sign of the Jubilee, the New Kingdom. All other progress is, as Bloch has put it, darkly progressive.³ The good news will be heard only when the body of Christ understands the heart of its community to be the poor.

This kind of understanding will not be possible from afar. Only the poor can speak fully for the poor. A community that claims to be for the poor and remains *far from* the poor is not what it claims. To be the body of Christ in the world, the community will be the community for the poor when it becomes a community *with* the poor. In this way not only is the body of Christ the hope for the poor, but the poor are the givers of hope for the body of Christ. As Dumas has put it, the two faces of Christ, the poor and the church, cannot remain alienated and expect to be whole.⁴ When they are together fully with each other and for each other, the faces of Christ are united and the body of Christ becomes one.

3. The Body of Christ Is a Community for the World

The fact that the community of the body of Christ is seen to be the community for the poor should not blind us to another important aspect of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus Christ came not only for the sake of human beings, the poor or otherwise. *Jesus Christ became human in and for the world.* As a body of Christ, then, the congregation is the human community in and for the world.

³Ernst Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), p. 113.

⁴Benoit Dumas, *The Two Alienated Faces of the One Church*, referred to in Julio De Santa Ana, *Toward a Church of the Poor* (New York: Maryknoll, 1981), p. 99.

It is not as if God created a community and suspended it, as it were, in thin air. The community created by God is created in a place, a world. The body of Christ is not estranged from the world. They feel at home here, knowing that they have been given their place by the grace of the One who gives them everything. Without this place there is no possibility for the beginning of community or its growth and sustenance. Our place, then, is our place only in the sense that we are part of it. The world, living and nonliving, is woven together in a mutually sustaining web of interdependence. We are, as Aldo Leopold put it, a part of the life pyramid, the complex, dynamic, and vital ongoing system in which each part is integral to the world and in which the good of each part derives from and participates in the good of the whole.⁵ The boundaries of community are larger than a simple reference to human community implies.

Here the relationship between the creation and covenant is important, but in a different way. Though the faith of the covenant community is a presupposition of any notion of creation at all, it is clear in the biblical accounts that covenant is for the sake of the whole creation. Thus the scope of the covenant is defined by the accounts of creation, and the wider meaning of God's covenant with Abraham is clear only when it is referred to the covenant with Noah. The children of Abraham become Abraham's children precisely because they are to be the people of the rainbow, those who are party to God's covenant with all the earth.

It is not as if the rest of the world is at the disposal of humanity to be simply *our* place. On the contrary, one might say that we are at the disposal of God for the world. Those who are in the image of God through Christ are in the image of a God who loves the world because she has made it. Therefore, our dominion over the earth, which itself is a gift, must be a dominion that is in every way analogous to the dominion of God over the earth. God's rule is loving, caring, and creative—one that bestows upon the world a gift of life with the hope of fulfillment.

There can, therefore, be no radical distinction between human and nonhuman life with respect to their value. Although it is true

⁵Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1971).

that because God became a human being human life is more important than nonhuman life, we can in no way assume that only human life is important. The world is good because it is good for God. We live in a place with other creatures, all of whom have value for God by virtue of God's own pronouncement of their goodness for her. We also know that the goodness of creation for God lies precisely in the beauty of its interrelationships, whereby the being of each one is constituted by its being with all the rest.

This is the vision for which the prophets were groping as they spoke of wolves lying down with lambs and the pounding of swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. The peaceable kingdom is a vision of God's relationship to the whole world, and that relationship is a redemptive ecological connection. This is why the writer of Colossians can speak of Christ as all in all, everything for everything; and this is that to which Paul pointed when he told the Romans of the eager longing and straining of the whole cosmos toward the coming of Christ and Christ's people. They are the community of the body of Christ, the one in whom all things were made and in whom all things now find their hope. Jesus Christ is the harbinger of God's ecological community. The bridgehead, the locus of the redemptive secret that is at the same time the meaning of creation, is the congregation.

THE BODY OF CHRIST IN WILTSHIRE CHURCH

The theological self-understanding of Wiltshire Church is a far cry from these promises to the body of Christ. The ministry that it offers is so narrowly focused on itself that it relates only marginally to the universal promises and claims of redemption manifested so clearly in the faith of Israel and in the church's understanding of the reality of Jesus Christ. Wiltshire Church is not really concerned about the world beyond itself and its own inner community. This is not to say, of course, that there are no persons of compassion who contribute to such causes as Bread for the World, nor is it to suggest that there are no conservationists and ecologists in the membership of the congregation. Indeed, there probably are! What I am suggesting is that there is nothing in their understanding of themselves as a congregation that would indicate that their being gathered as a Christian community entails these sorts

of commitments to the poor in the world. The reigning theological understanding of Wiltshire Church as well as the programs of the congregation give no clues as to how much it is identified with the body of Christ for the poor and for the world.

To be sure, the Wiltshire Church does understand itself to be a fully human community, but it is a community closed in on itself. It is almost a classic case of the American culture Protestantism that identifies salvation and success with each other. If this church is a community of the faithful, the faithful are also upwardly mobile. Yet, as Bellah has said of nineteenth-century American religion, there is an ambivalence here.⁶ There is a hint of the knowledge that "something more" is required than the trappings of "Shangri-la." Thus, though many may be in this community precisely because it is the "best show in town," there are others who are there because all of the "best show" trappings in the world do not quite satisfy them. Many are there because they are hurt, and they do not receive ministry. Many are there because they are confused, and they do not receive guidance and counsel. Others are there because they hope for a renewal of faith for their children. Wiltshire Church as a community does meet many of these needs. People have felt the healing of being present together there.

Even though there is healing in the community of Wiltshire Church, there is also conflict. Although it does not appear to be theological in substance, it does have important ramifications for our theological analysis. The tone and the issues of the conflict at Wiltshire have become serious causes of interpersonal alienation. Distrust has surfaced to the point where the humanity of the community is at stake. There is very little "presence" of the one to the other in many cases, and mutuality in speech and hearing apparently has disappeared in the face of a cacophony of mutual recrimination. This sort of response is a violation of the bond of community and is proving to be personally destructive to a number of persons. Thus, in spite of the healing that has gone on for many, and in spite of the common focus that binds Wiltshire

⁶Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), chap. 3, pp. 61 ff.

people together, the fabric of the congregation is in danger of being shattered by anticomunal, authoritarian, and heedlessly vindictive styles of interpersonal communication. Human community at best is fragile, even when everyone works at it. At present, the parties to the conflict seem to be little inclined to make much effort toward mutual ministry.

In the midst of the problems in the life of Wiltshire Church, there is a sign of hope. Church members place heavy emphasis on the importance of worship, particularly on the importance of Communion. This priority was reflected in the responses of members to the questionnaire on beliefs. The majority view the giving of Communion as one of the most important tasks of the minister. Although I do not want to make too much of this, they do seem to be groping for a community identification with the body of Christ that has universal dimensions. There is a hint that the community of Wiltshire Church is not simply a community for itself, but that in some way it is a community of persons identified with and implicated with the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ for the world and for each other. That may be all that can be said at this point. If it is a hint of deeper awareness, it is only a hint.

In short, Wiltshire Church partakes very much in the paradox of the people of God. It is at once a self-centered, fractured, and culture-bound community of like-minded persons, and at the same time, by the miracle of grace, it is the body of Christ symbolized in the bread and wine, called to be for each other and for the poor and for the world. The fact that the church is not completely for the world and for the poor—or even, for that matter, fully for each other—in no way negates the fact that it is called by God to be those things. The theological challenge for this church is to involve itself intimately with discerning external critics of their religiosity by hearing from those whose needs are not being met in Wiltshire, Springfield, and elsewhere. They also need to expose themselves to those who are actually poor, and to Christians with global perspectives on the church and ministry. That kind of communication will reveal to Wiltshire the promise of God that it can claim for itself and by which it can be claimed. If this happens, its vision of its ministry will change, its suffering will become redemptive, and its presence will provide new hope for those who

are now in the community of Wiltshire Church; and an increasing number of those now on the periphery of concern might join the center.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RELATED READING

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. 3, part 2. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960.

In this section of the *Dogmatics*, Barth discusses the doctrine of creation. Here the marks of human community are presented under the rubric "the basic form of humanity." As is the case in all of Barth's *Dogmatics*, all humanity is humanity understood in light of Jesus Christ's humanity, but the humanity of which Barth speaks is not identical to that of Jesus. In other words, the humanity described at this point is humanity as such, creative humanity, and not the promised humanity with God that is revealed fully in Jesus Christ. It is humanity "with each other" by virtue of its origin in the creative act of God, but it can exist yet ignorant of its origin.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Sanctorum Communio*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

This is Bonhoeffer's basic book on the nature of the church and society. It is here that Bonhoeffer develops a notion of the self as social as opposed to the individualism of his forebearers in idealism. He also argues that all being is relational whether that being is a single human being or a community of human beings in relation to other communities. Since it is not possible to be human except in relation, Bonhoeffer grounds the humanity of all humankind in relation to God. As the community before God, humankind is a real community. Without this relation, there is no ground for any conception of the reality of humankind as a total community.

Metz, J. B. *Theology of World*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1969.

This is a series of essays by Metz in which he develops a sociocritical approach for the church. Though Metz moves toward a "political theology," he is not clear just how this relates either to congregations or to the church as a whole. What he argues essentially is for a change in the historical perspective of the theology of the church from the past to the future. This eschatological perspective then places the church in a critical posture toward all past and present sociopolitical realities, including the theology of the church itself. The theology of the church becomes creative in the sense that the

church knows that the world is called to hope for peace, justice, and reconciliation in the future. It is militant in the sense that it calls into question at all times past and present contradictions of its hope for the future.

Niebuhr, H. R. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943.

I refer to this book primarily because of the essay on "the center of value," where Niebuhr argues that in the final analysis all value is relational and that all valuing is therefore relative to the valuing center. The unity of value is constituted by God as a valuing center. For God, what is has value. Any less universal perspective on value that makes value instrumental to centers of value other than God is not a genuine monotheistic faith.

Schottroff, Luise, and Stegemann, Wolfgang. *Jesus von Nazareth: Hoffnung der Armen*. Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 1978.

This is a New Testament study, primarily in the gospel of Luke. The basic thesis is that Jesus' ministry was focused on liberation for the poor. They argue that not only was Jesus' ministry for the poor, but the community Jesus gathered was a church of the poor.

Steck, Odell Hannes. *World and Environment*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980.

This is a study of the biblical understanding of world as it relates to the whole natural milieu. The focus is upon the accounts of creation in Genesis and the creation psalms. Though Steck admits that there is little direct application that can be made of biblical understanding of creation to the present environmental crisis, he does argue that the biblical writers understand clearly the interdependence of creation in a way that contradicts a strict subject/object distinction between humanity and world characteristic of post-Cartesian philosophy and modern science.