

Deep and wide

by [Mark Noll](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue



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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined.

In Sunday School more than 50 years ago we used to sing, “Deep and wide, deep and wide, there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide.” Perhaps our teachers knew what was flowing deep and wide, how to identify the fountain, and where whatever was flowing flowed, though I doubt if we kids who chimed in so enthusiastically had an inkling. Now, however, I find this simple chorus comes close to describing how my mind has changed over the last four decades.

The place in time from which I am measuring change is the period surrounding graduation from an evangelical Christian college, the first faltering steps toward an academic career, and marriage to Maggie Packer, who, 40 years on, is more of an anchor than ever. Looking back now, it is clear that in this formative period an intellectual and spiritual home was being built for me of several different elements.

One was a growing sense that learning about the past was going to be my best means for understanding the present. Another was coming to realize that the evangelical milieus in which I found myself would be acceptable contexts for family, work and worship. Still another was discovering through reading (Roland Bainton, A. G. Dickens, Gordon Rupp, Jaroslav Pelikan, Philip Watson, John T. McNeill) and through the conservative Presbyterian circles to which my wife introduced me that the classical Protestantism of the Reformation could provide a solid foundation for my faith and works. Most important was coming to experience the grace of God in Jesus Christ as liberation from an existence otherwise enchained by the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life.

In the decades since this construction process got under way, I have had no reason to deconstruct any of it, and many reasons to thank God for providing it.

Change, however, has taken place through coming to see how very deep and very wide was what, as a young adult, I was first given to glimpse. Yet as may be typical for those of us who are not expert at self-reflection, I'm not exactly sure how best to align changes of mind and the experiences that propelled change.

To the best that I can discern, "how my mind has changed" goes something like this: the basic dogmas of Nicene Christianity have become more important—they now seem truer—than in the hour I first believed. From that hour I knew that Christianity was deep and that it was beautiful. Now I believe that the depth is unfathomable and the beauty supernal beyond telling. I also have come to believe that no single word can describe the faith, though *dogma*, *story* and *reality* all catch something of what is confessed in saying that Almighty God made "the heaven and earth"; that "the only Son of God . . . true God from true God" was the one "through him all things were made"; that this one "for us and for our salvation . . . came down from heaven" and was "incarnate from the Virgin Mary"; and that he was "for our sake" crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead on the third day; and that his "kingdom will have no end" as it is extended forever and ever through the "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life."

The deeper and wider ramifications of Nicene Christianity are difficult for me to disentangle, because it has been through experiencing the unfathomable depths of Nicene Christianity that the surpassing breadth of classical Christian faith has become clearer as well. The changes represent an incremental growth in awareness over the years rather than illumination through specific events or striking eureka's. The experiences prompting these changes have been various, their effectiveness cumulative and their influences overlapping.

Academics too easily substitute bibliography for biography, but books have made a difference. So I'm able to see where I was helped by Martin Luther and John Stott on the cross of Christ, by C. S. Lewis on the subject of "mere Christianity," by Lewis's friend J. R. R. Tolkien demonstrating the power of narrative, by E. Harris Harbison and Herbert Butterfield on historical study understood in Christian terms, by James R. Moore and David Livingstone on the supposed conflicts between science and Christianity, by Dorothy L. Sayers on the sanctity of daily work, by Boyd Hilton and Quentin Skinner on the embeddedness of all formal discourse (including theology), and in recent years by a great cloud of witnesses on the expansion of Christian faith around the globe. I am also aware of a more diffuse intellectual influence from the loosely organized American "school" that has promoted Abraham Kuyper's understanding of the lordship of Christ over all creation.

Yet even an academic knows that experiences beyond the page usually exert a greater force than what is written. For me, some of those experiences took place when I was a student. As an undergraduate at Wheaton College I learned from several professors how natural it could be to link serious intellectual pursuits with simple Christian faithfulness. At Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the early 1970s I learned still more. Several faculty, led by David Wells, portrayed the faith as a thing of intellectual power and moral beauty stretching back over the centuries and—despite many blotches, missteps and disasters—deserving full commitment of heart, soul, mind and spirit. Then at Vanderbilt University I found out how much I could learn about things that meant most to me from professors and fellow students whose commitments diverged in small and sometimes major ways from my own. That realization accompanied a parallel awareness that though some of the historical figures I was studying were hardly evangelical in a modern American sense, they nonetheless exemplified the finest evangelical virtues and offered the most penetrating evangelical insights—in the etymological sense of the word.

When I returned to teach at Trinity College, a sister institution to Trinity Seminary, I enjoyed a year of weekly coffee sessions with David Wells and George Marsden, the latter visiting from his regular post at Calvin College. These casual meetings gave me much more than most postdocs harvest from a year of uninterrupted study. It was a direct experience of the same mixture of intellect and godliness that historical study was providing through other means—though both David and George seemed to have a better sense of humor than most of the great Christian figures of the past.

Through such educational experiences the beginnings of change were taking place: from thinking of the believer's general vocation in Christ and my specific calling to the academy as needing some effort to be brought together to realizing that my task was to discover already existing organic harmonies; and from conceiving the boundaries of "genuine" Christian faith narrowly to thinking that these boundaries might be capacious in ways I had hardly imagined.

These educational experiences were important, but not as telling as the common human experiences of marriage, family, church and day-to-day living. To be the best that I can recall, gradual shifts of perspective came into clearer focus over the course of my fifth decade (1986–1996). For what were probably personal reasons but also because of certain conventions in postwar American evangelicalism, I once thought of Christian life as the arena where hard-won principles were applied, where a proper grasp of the faith was put to work in realizing the faith in practice. Without giving up that notion entirely, I came to feel that the relation between conviction and experience was much tighter, much more interdependent than I had once thought.

The change was from thinking about the truthfulness of classical Christianity, the beauty of its breathtaking drama and the effort of Christian living as relatively discrete matters, to experiencing Christian truth, Christian beauty and Christian life as a whole. Through this process, dogma was actually becoming more important, but the range of dogmatic questions that now seemed of first importance shrank considerably.

This shift took place amid circumstances in which God manifested himself more viscerally, through both absence and presence, than in disciplined study alone. As only a partial list, the situations included a wrenching church split; the death of my father, who in his latter years had become a very good friend; the death of a very good friend who had become like a father; and the confusing pain of other friends'

dashed hopes. In these situations—where answers were scarce—the Christian faith remained no less real. In fact, it became more intensely real. But the sense of that reality came mostly through believing friends who stood alongside during dark days, through hymns sung and recalled, and through the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Fellowship was the in-group word for what took on new force through those years. This standing together through duress seemed simple but was anything but. It was the “communion of the saints,” not as the result or the product of what came before these words in the Apostles' Creed, but as an instantiation of those realities. First and always most important was communion in Christ with my spouse, then with a wide circle of friends, fellow church members, and associates at work. Our pastor in those years was a pastor indeed, a shepherd who certainly did some herding, but more important, stood with, prayed with and wept with the sheep. I had had such a pastor once before, but not until these later years did I realize how much the empathic gentleness of that shepherd of my youth had done to maintain an opening for faith.

Hymns did not exactly take on new meaning; rather, I began to sense more clearly why the best had been so consistently moving since at least the early adult years of self-conscious faith. Regarded simply as texts, they could offer unusually evocative communications of strong theology. But the gripping force of the hymns lay in their affect and not simply in their words alone, in the more-than-rational conviction they communicated through the combination of careful writing and effective music. It could not have been a coincidence that in these years J. S. Bach became, as he has been for so many others, a kind of fifth evangelist. Sometime in this period I was also delighted to discover that Charles Hodge, the 19th-century lion of Princeton Seminary who has been so often criticized for writing theology as an exercise in scientific biblical rationalism, suggested on several occasions that hymns and devotional writings from the far reaches of the church could construct an entirely sufficient account of the Christian faith.

A significant bonus in thinking about why the best hymns worked so powerfully at cognitive, emotional and spiritual levels lay in recognizing where these particularly gripping hymns came from. As basically a Calvinist myself, I nonetheless saw immediately that the best hymns came from many points on the Christian compass. Some were ancient (for example, Ambrose of Milan: “O splendor of God's glory bright, from light eternal bringing light”), some were contemporary (Margaret Clarkson: “He, who in creation's dawning brooded on the lifeless deep, still across

our nature's darkness moves to wake our souls from sleep"). Some were heavy (Johann Herrmann: "Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended . . . I it was denied thee: I crucified thee"), some were light (Fanny Crosby: "Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save"). They came from fellow Calvinists ("I greet thee who my sure Redeemer art"), but also from the winsome and zany Count von Zinzendorf ("Jesus, thy blood and righteousness"), from Mennonites, Disciples of Christ, Catholics, Pentecostals, independents, and especially from the implacably Arminian Charles Wesley ("Arise, my soul, arise, shake off thy guilty fears, the bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears. . . . My name is written on his hands").

Such effective hymns went deep because they communicated the core dogmas of the Nicene Creed with unusual force. Concentration on those core dogmas made them singable by believers almost everywhere; the singing turned them into love.

A further broadening effect of the great hymns took me longer to comprehend. With the help especially of Andrew Walls's account of how the once-incarnate Christ has been, as it were, incarnated afresh wherever Christianity enters a new culture, I came to see something else. While the dogmas of these hymns were universal, the music that played such a powerful part in quickening the dogma was particular. Isaac Watts's "When I survey the wondrous cross" remained fairly inert words on the page without the tune "Rockingham," by Edward Miller, or "Hamburg," by Lowell Mason. I might find singing this hymn with a rock-and-roll melody or accompanied by a five-toned Thai xylophone an intellectual curiosity, but it would not be heartfelt worship.

Over time the obvious became clear: the hymns did their great work for me as they were sung with music originating from only about 200 years of Western musical history (1650–1850). With music not from the West and with later or earlier Western music, the affect simply was not the same. Extension was the next step: if I was experiencing the universal gospel through a particular cultural expression, it followed that the same gospel could be as powerfully communicated through other cultural expressions, even if those expressions were alien or foreign to me. The experience of those who could be moved by a rock-and-roll rendition of "When I survey the wondrous cross," or by a five-toned Thai version of a similar hymn, was, in principle, just as authentic as when I sang these words set to "Rockingham." Understood in this way, the hymns were making me at the same time both a cultural relativist and a stronger Christian dogmatist.

The experience that prompted the deepest reflection on the nature of Christianity and my own life as a Christian was regular celebration of the Lord's Supper. For years our Presbyterian church in the western suburbs of Chicago celebrated communion in the Scots' Form, in which congregants came to the front, sat at tables and were served the elements by the elders. This experience in retro-Calvinism was powerful beyond words—in part because it was an intensely communal experience (we knew the joys and sorrows of many who moved forward to be served) and because it was always accompanied by music (we sang good hymns, some old and some new, that focused on the work of Christ “for us and for our salvation”).

What drew this cyclone of emotion into sharpest focus was when the elder, almost always a man or woman whom we knew and loved, said in giving out the elements, “This is the body of Christ broken for you” and “This is the blood of Christ shed for you,” or similar words.

Many years before it had been intellectually thrilling to read Martin Luther as he expatiated on the *pro me, pro nobis* (“for me, for us”) of the gospel. Over the years, the intellectual frisson became an existential epiphany. I was (and am) not sure of the dogmatic details; none of the classic formulas that have tried to explain “the real presence” of Christ in the Lord's Supper seems entirely satisfying. But whether in Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinist form, I became convinced that in the Eucharist God draws those who take part into the fellowship of his Son. If I was ready, if I was not, if my sins lay heavy on my soul, if I had a momentary difficulty remembering recent transgressions, if there were distractions, if attention was perfectly focused—the circumstances were far, far less important than the phrases ending with “for you,” than the eating and the drinking.

Reflection on the force of what transpired so regularly drove me to the following conclusions. The Lord's Supper encompasses life so powerfully only because it speaks of events that really happened and dramatizes dogmas that mean exactly what they say. But being invited to share in the rite and enjoying the privileges of believing the dogma require a transforming experience of the whole person. It pushes vigorously against pretense, ego, pride, self-serving, irony and all the other postures that come so easily to all humans—maybe especially to the intellectually attuned. It enacts emptiness being filled, guilt overcome by grace, strife restored to communion. It demands my soul, my life, my all.

Once again, however, as the depth of experiencing the Lord's Supper opened up, it did not take long to intimate also how wide the experience had to be. If it was true that God reached out to me through the celebration of communion, so it was true that he reached out to all who took part in the rite. I continue to believe that differences in how the celebration takes place—differences in theology, authority, practice, belief and more—are far from insignificant. Yet it strikes me as still more significant that all who are called to the table are opened to experiencing the grace for which it stands and which it communicates. With considerable arrogance, I even believe that this account of God acting toward us in the sacrament holds true for fellow believers who regard it as only symbolic and even—through yet another mystery—for those few who do without communion entirely. Over the years it has been a useful exercise trying to voice these convictions in verse—for example, "Scots' Form in the Suburbs" and "Somewhere Every Day" (see pp. 32 and 33).

Brad Gregory's magnificent history of persecution in the Reformation era, *Salvation at Stake*, offers an especially compelling account of eucharistic realities. In that strife-torn period, it was most often differences over what the sacrament meant that made Europeans willing to die—and kill—for their faith. Western civilization has certainly progressed since the 16th century in abandoning capital punishment as a means to adjudicate conflicts over the Lord's Supper, but it has also suffered a great loss. That loss is retreat from our ancestors' knowledge that life and death are at issue in every offering of the wine and bread with the words ". . . for you."

To concentrate, as this essay has done, on Christian fellowship, the singing of hymns and celebration of the Lord's Supper risks the common pietist error of understanding oneself only at the cost of forgetting about the world. But if space permitted, it might be possible to show how a stronger existential grasp of Nicene Christianity can lead naturally to heightened diligence in supposedly secular tasks (including academic work), stronger commitments to social service and political engagement, much calmer attitudes concerning science and religion, increased confidence in the scriptures, deeper engagement with family and those we encounter daily, and greater concern for world affairs, whether bearing directly on Christian communities or not.

Perhaps it comes more naturally for an evangelical, in the contemporary sense of the word, to offer the sort of personal testimony found in this essay than to say what such a testimony means for other people and other circumstances. The changes I have tried to describe, however, leave me convinced that since the fountain I sang

about so many years ago is Christ, what flows from that fountain is immeasurably wide in all dimensions as well as incalculably deep for all humanity.

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