Reversals

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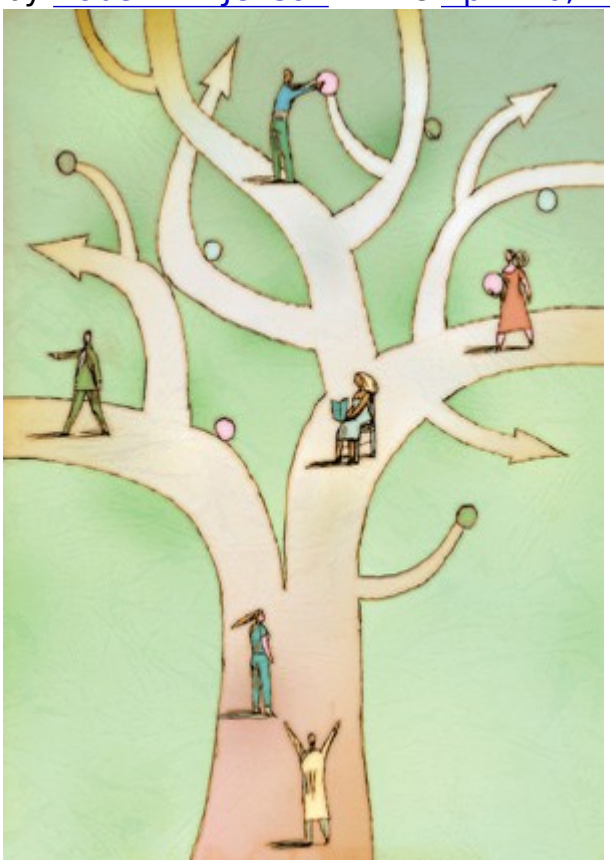
by Robert W. Jenson in the April 20, 2010 issue



Todd Davidson

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. This article is the sixth in the series.*

So far as I can recall, most changes of my theological mind have not been changes from an established view to a contrary, but rather the result of encounter with a

question or concern that had not before gripped me. I will devote the first part of this essay to a few items of this sort and somewhat arbitrarily set its *terminus a quo* at 1963, when I was 33 and had seminary, the doctorate and a few years of teaching behind me. The second part will narrate a linked series of actual changes of mind, which I must reach back to an earlier date to tell.

Item: In the summer of 1963 I was hanging around Harvard's libraries, worrying about hermeneutics. Local civil rights groups were recruiting for a risky-sounding demonstration in Washington; and I thought maybe I should sign up, except that. . . .

On the last Sunday before the march, Henry Horn, pastor of University Lutheran Church, preached a sermon that moved me to immediate overt action—not a common event. The Gospel for the Sunday was the parable of the son who said "I go" and went not and the son who said "I go not" and went. When Horn entered the pulpit, all he said was that recruiting for the march was still open and how to get to the sign-up place. That afternoon several young scholars headed for Roxbury to sign up.

My experience of the great march was life-changing and the first of a series of events that politicized my wife, Blanche, and me. To be sure, our civil rights activism was itself comparatively undemanding. I taught at a college—Luther College in Decorah, Iowa—that immediately embraced the movement (our "protest" marches were led by the college president) and strained its resources to expand minority recruitment and establish ties with historically black colleges. And we were in England during the nation's most rigorous and frightening times.

Subsequent efforts against the intervention in Vietnam would be more strenuous. We returned to this country, for me to begin teaching at Gettysburg Seminary, late in the wild summer of 1968. We drove across the country listening to radio reports of the Democratic convention and the accompanying police riot. Gettysburg was handy to Washington: in the following years our demonstration clothes and kit were always ready to go. Indeed, Gettysburg became a sort of staging point for the marches. There were teach-ins and strikes at the local college and the seminary. I gave speeches in volatile environments, some with cops taking notes. We plotted. We made strange allies. Etc.

At more or less the same time a leftish Washington think tank recruited me as a consultant—they thought they should maybe know something about religion. And

the venerable Leopold Bernhard, “pastor for political affairs” at Reformation Lutheran Church, just behind the capitol, made me a regular speaker in his sessions for inside-the-beltway types.

When *Roe v*. *Wade* came down, we thought that protest against killing in an unjust war would naturally be followed by protest against killing children unable themselves to appeal for justice. But we, like others, were abandoned by our party and “the movement.” This at once disordered and exacerbated our politics.

In the view with which all this has left me, Christian theology does not have “political implications” of the right or of the left, because the church’s theology simply is its political theory—and indeed is the only true political theory. This does not mean that Christians will not disagree politically, but their disagreements will not be theologically neutral. And since there are some theological convictions which all Christians will share if they are faithful, there will be a few political positions of the same order.

What, for instance, is a “person,” a word much used in some political theory? Standard doctrine teaches that what is true and good in God is the originating model of what is true and good in creatures; and in the church’s doctrine of God—by no coincidence whatsoever—the notion of “person” plays a central role. Each person of the triune God simply *is* the third to the other two, established in its identity by its relation to them. Moreover, one of those persons is the mutual Word of the others. Thus a proper created person, as an analogue of triune personhood, can be neither the autonomous individual of much liberal illusion nor a mere item of a class or other mass; and the medium of the relations by which he or she exists will be address and response. A true polity would then be an arena in which persons were present to one another analogously to the mutual presence of the triune persons, engaged in discourse of the good.

Item: Three years spent teaching at Oxford, which in the 1960s and early 1970s was still the intellectual center of an intact (if barely) Church of England, had a major effect on Blanche and me. We were, of course, church folk. But at Oxford we came to experience the church as we somehow had missed doing before, as a reality just *there*, a sheer theological fact instituted by God. For one instance of our education, at a Eucharist in the chapel of Pusey House—where we had gone out of curiosity—the house master said in his homily that we should understand: whether these particular persons assembled again or not, he and the residents would be

there, maintaining divine service. Consciousness of the church and its prayers as givens, prior to what individuals may do or think about them, has grown on us through the years since.

Item: I am part of the current revolt against the hegemony of “historical-critical” procedures in the exegesis of scripture. This does not mean I have turned against the practices themselves—they were in fact the vehicle of my initial access to scripture—but I have been made increasingly aware that historical-critical work cannot stand alone but must rather serve the church’s intrinsic exegetical task: reading the Bible as a single book telling a single story—indeed, as a christological metanarrative. This concern has even carried me into an unexpected new career: I have in recent years written two biblical commentaries, both on books of the Old Testament.

A final such item: Events have in recent years confronted me with the fact of Judaism in newly demanding fashion. The awakening has had two sides.

The one: I have realized how urgently the church needs a Christian theology of Judaism. It is all very well to renounce supersessionism, but how then *should* the church understand Judaism’s continuing existence? In the next decades, powerful historical forces will drive Judaism and the church ever more closely together, and if they are to stand together, they will have to know why that is a good thing to do. It is not for Christian theologians to say how Judaism should regard its new partner, but the church on its side must find understanding that reaches far beyond good will.

I have been working at it. One key question Christian thinkers might ask themselves: since the church has become almost entirely gentile, can it by itself provide the risen Jewish Christ with a people of his own? Perhaps the risen Christ needs sisters and brothers who maintain Jewish identity in order to be himself, even when—or even because—they do not acknowledge him.

The other: in Richard John Neuhaus’s colloquia and elsewhere I found that Jewish-Christian discourse need not be a mere exchange of views but can be a joint reflection on shared theological problems. I am working on that too, in various ways. This semester, a younger Jewish scholar and I are team-teaching a seminar at the local university on theological anthropology. And I cochair an institute, based in Israel and Princeton, that sponsors Jewish-Christian working parties on such shared

themes as covenant and mission.

And so to the second, more narrative part of this essay, with its earlier *terminus a quo*. Assigned for my seminary internship to the Lutheran Student House at the University of Minnesota, I met and shortly fell in love with Blanche Rockne, counselor to the many flourishing programs then located there. Our first date—one had such things then—devolved into an argument about the World Council of Churches. As a self-consciously firm Lutheran, I was contemptuous of theologically pusillanimous Protestantism, which I presumed dominated the ecumenical movement. She had advised student groups at several state universities, necessarily in cooperation with other confessions. She won the argument and subsequently converted me to a principled ecumenism.

I could not at the time imagine what a train of consequences would follow one lost argument. In the event I have spent much of my career as a passionate ecumenist in the national Episcopal-Lutheran and the international Catholic-Lutheran dialogues: organizing conferences and study groups; speaking and writing on ecumenical matters; and co-hatching ecumenical schemes. I became and remain convinced that the original ecumenical vision, formulated at the WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, represents the mandate of God: in any place where there are Christians, there is to be one eucharistic communion. It does not follow that all Christians in a locality must be alike in “ceremonies,” only that they must enjoy some common oversight, be able to recognize one another’s sacramental celebrations as authentic and be able to participate in them. Indeed, in my judgment, to the extent that this is not the case the very reality of the church is called into question.

In several of the connections just noted, mention must be made of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and its journal, *Pro Ecclesia*, which Carl Braaten and I founded to promote the central theological tradition regardless of participants’ confessional affiliations. And as my last full-time appointment, I spent eight years as senior scholar of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, a hopefully benevolent spider at the center of what was in those years an international web of theologians of all traditions, an uninhibited ecumenical movement all its own.

A second reversal resulted from the first: ecumenical experience alienated me from extant denominational- territorial Lutheranism. I will name just one venue of the several in which this happened, the international Catholic-Lutheran dialogue. During ten years as permanent adviser to its third round of discussions, I was regularly

appalled by Lutheran representatives' determination that nothing be proposed that would require actually changing anything in their churches' lives (the Lutheran cochair, Bishop James Crumley, was a splendid exception). I was further appalled by the Lutherans' lack of theological imagination or nuance as compared with the other party—I had thought it was supposed to be the other way around. For example, is it truly impossible for Lutherans to understand and in their fashion share Vatican II's description of the church as "a sort of sacrament" of general human unity? This may be the place to record that, looking into a book I published in 1970, I found that I had distinguished protestant and catholic "sensibilities" and identified the former as my own; now I would have to say the opposite.

I continue to regard Luther as one of the church's few truly necessary theologians and the 16th- and early 17th-century Lutheran "scholastics" as a neglected treasure. The great potential contribution of both is their metaphysically revisionary Christology/sacramentology. How, for one central matter, are we to construe "body" or "space" if the eucharistic elements truly are the risen Christ's body? As theories, such construals as "transubstantiation" are only stopgaps.

As the West slouches toward nihilism, we can no longer depend on the surrounding culture's patterns of thought to provide a context within which the gospel's claims are intelligible. The church has to do its own revisionary thinking, bending metaphysics to the claims of the gospel rather than the usual other way around. The old Lutherans made a start.

But the way officially representative Lutheranism now uses its heritage—or rather a few slogans ripped from it—is another matter. For a central case: "We are justified by faith" is *not* the gospel. It is a doctrine *about* the gospel—the gospel itself is a *narrative* that makes a promise, the story of Jesus in Israel. Nor is justification by faith the one doctrine "by which the church stands or falls"; it is one of a number for which that might be claimed. And when preachers and the drafters of denominational statements try to derive the whole life of the church from this doctrine—or as it likely will be said, from "the gospel"—the necessary result is biblically untethered preaching, trivialized liturgy and, perhaps most disastrous, culturally accommodated ethics and church practice.

If a *doctrine* is the gospel to be proclaimed, then the preacher has nothing to do but recite and explain that doctrine, never mind what the text may be about. Thus the famous Lutheran sermon template: 15 minutes of moralism, ending with "But never

mind, God loves us all anyway, on account of our faith." If such biblical liturgical mandates as "Do this . . ." are "law" and not "gospel," and if "the gospel" is all that finally binds us, then liturgical leaders are free to do whatever strikes their—often feeble—fancy. And if, for example, the biblical channelings of sexual desire are again "law" and only the "gospel" constrains us, then the church has no disciplinary defense against the late-modern sexual chaos that threatens its people also, including the ranks of its clergy.

Blanche and I remain members of a liturgically and homiletically exceptional Lutheran congregation, one that is unfortunately distant from Princeton, where there is no congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I remain on the ELCA clergy list. But we mostly worship with two Episcopal congregations for the sake of regular and recognizable Eucharist, the Book of Common Prayer and generous provision of publicly read scripture.

One may well ask: why do you stay in this ecclesially irregular situation? As things stand, moving formally from the ELCA to the Episcopal Church would merely exchange frying pans. For a long time I regarded a move to Rome as inevitable. But to end this narrative I must report another reversal: we will not, we now think, become Roman Catholic, despite great empathy with formerly Lutheran or Anglican friends and allies who have.

I have written that all Western churches should be under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome, in his role as patriarch of the West. I have written that the universal church needs a universal pastor and that Rome is the only place for this ministry. I stand by all that. But I have never believed and do not now believe that one's soul is endangered merely by lacking full communion with Rome. Nor do I believe that a celebration of the Eucharist or of other of the mysteries lacks any reality or efficacy sheerly because the celebrant has not been ordained by a bishop recognized as such by Rome. Thus individuals—as distinct from churches—who are not in full communion with the bishop of Rome can and therefore must decide for themselves whether to seek it. That such individual choices are inescapable is among the punishments visited upon a divided church.

So why do we now decide to remain where we are, wherever that is? Perhaps we in fact do not have an easily formulated answer. Let me just say: stubborn, indeed now somewhat desperate, dedication to that original ecumenical vision and an accumulation of experiences and reflections, none decisive by itself, have wrought

also this change of mind.

And then, who knows what yet may happen, perhaps as a result of increasing familiarity with Judaism or simply of some unexpected writing assignment?

Other installments in this "How my mind has changed" series:

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