The making of a postliberal: Formed and reformed: Two stories

by Martin B. Copenhaver in the October 14, 1998 issue

Sitting on the four corners of an intersection in the town where I grew up are the public school, the library, the town hall and my home church. Every morning an American flag is raised in front of each of the four buildings. The church, however, sits on a hill above the other public buildings, as if presiding over all of them. The church is built of stone, and its sturdy Norman architecture seems to rise out of the massive rock formations that mark the earth throughout the town. To this day, when I sing "The Church's One Foundation," or hear reference to Peter as "the rock" on which Jesus will build his church, I think of that building.

My father was the senior minister of the church. When he looked out the window of his study, he could survey the town as if it were all his parish, and in a sense it was: the church membership included over a third of the town's population.

Furthermore, when my father was called as pastor to that church, he was also accorded a privileged position in the wider community. As a minister, his authority was recognized not just in the church but throughout the rest of the town. His sermons were cited in conversation about current issues almost as often as James Reston's column in the *New York Times*. My father was often asked to offer a prayer at the Memorial Day services on the town hall lawn or at graduation ceremonies at the public school. Civic organizations reserved a seat on the board for a clergyman (they were all men then), and often that seat was occupied by my father. Those who were not members of any church would turn to him for counsel, expecting him to have a compassionate ear and a wise word that was safe for general consumption (that is, containing only trace amounts of religion). Many people outside the congregation would call on him to officiate at their weddings or to have their babies "done" (baptized).

I loved my father and, as his son, I basked in the overflow of respect in which he was held. I was Little Lord Fauntleroy sliding down the banisters in the mansion. I'm

certain that a large part of the appeal of the ministry for me in my early years was imagining that I could inherit my father's estate and preside over it as he had done.

I was born in 1954, at the epicenter of the baby boom. (The cornerstones of countless church school additions are inscribed with that year.) It was an era in which every respectable, upwardly mobile and concerned citizen was expected to be in church on Sunday morning and the children were expected to be in Sunday school. The formal photograph of my confirmation class, taken on the front steps of the church, included half of my school classmates; many of the rest attended the Catholic and Episcopal churches. In 1954 the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and President Eisenhower made the observation, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith--and I don't care what faith it is." Of course, "religious faith" was assumed to be synonymous with Christian.

This "kingdom" of American liberal Protestantism does not exist anymore. We are not in charge anymore, if we ever really were. Many respond to this experience of "exile" by calling for a return to a time when the culture accommodated religious practice and supported the Christian values that we aim to instill in our children, a time when stores were closed on Sundays and prayers were offered in schools on Monday mornings. By contrast, I believe that we cannot return to another time, and that there are ways in which we can welcome these changes, as unsettling as they may be.

Our culture's accommodation of Christianity was always rather thin, lulling us into the notion that the world would somehow do our work for us. When the culture-at-large tipped its hat to religion, we Christians became complacent. We assumed that the job of shaping Christians would be done in the world, rather than in the church. Of course, we should have been suspicious. When the gospel that Paul called "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the gentiles" becomes widely and easily accepted by the culture-at-large, something is wrong.

Today the secular culture makes no apology for defying or simply ignoring the challenges of the gospel. This should not surprise us. The world is once again acting like the world. This leaves the church with the challenge of acting like the church. We need to take up the job that was always ours, the job of becoming a community in which Christian lives can be formed.

I am a child of American liberal Protestantism. My parents met as students in a class taught by Reinhold Niebuhr. My father's mentor was Harry Emerson Fosdick, who left his indelible stamp on a generation of preachers who came under his tutelage or were inspired by his example.

The preaching I heard revealed an underlying liberal assumption that there is continuity between the best human thought and the Christian gospel (an understanding summarized by the title of Nathanael Guptill's 1956 book, *Christianity Does Make Sense*). Sermons were generously sprinkled with quotes from every human endeavor. The preacher might use the words of a poet, the findings of a sociologist, the research of a scientist and the observations of a contemporary journalist to support the sermon's point. To be sure, there were also references to scripture, but often these were made as if they were a summary of all that had gone before. The gospel was treated as the capstone of human experience.

Worship was where you got your marching orders. It is where you heard a critique of the culture and were told how to go about changing the culture, largely through political action. The enemies were named--poverty, racism and war--but they were described as the enemies of every thinking, compassionate person. For the most part, we stood for whatever socially concerned Americans stood for. In church, however, we were given religious reasons for hating enemies we already hated and for believing in those things we already believed in.

Talk about Jesus gave the impression that what we received from Jesus could be obtained by other means. Often Jesus was used as a kind of crowning sermon illustration, underscoring other truths that were there for us to grasp if we would only open ourselves to the accumulated wisdom of the ages. How could we not listen to Jesus when other authorities from a variety of disciplines seemed to be saying the same thing in their own ways? An atheist friend once gave this critique of liberal preachers: "You hear what the psychologist says, what the historian says, what the New York Times editorial writer says, and then the sermon concludes with, 'And perhaps Jesus said it best . . .'"

It is not surprising that in college I was drawn to theologians like Paul Tillich. Tillich had a way of translating the Christian faith into terms that made it sound reasonable and erudite. Such approaches reassured me that I could be both a Christian and a sophisticated college student without giving up anything. In those days I explained to friends the attraction of going into the ministry by saying, "It's the closest thing in

our culture to being a full-time philosopher."

At this time I was wooing the young woman who would become my wife. Karen is not from a churchgoing family, so she had some questions about marrying a pastor. On one late-night walk I tried to explain my motivation. I recounted all the miseries and injustices in the world. Many people live lives of quiet desperation, I said. They need a way to respond positively to what is going on around them. They want to make a difference. The church seems like a good way to do that. "I have been given so much," I said, "I just want to help people."

Today I cannot remember these first interpretations of my call to ministry without wincing. When I began to serve my first church I discovered that I am not qualified to be a full-time philosopher. Most of the people I addressed from the pulpit were older than I was, and probably wiser. I wondered why they would listen to the reflections of a 27-year-old. Before long I concluded that no congregation would be interested in gathering each week to listen to Martin Copenhaver's observations about life. Left on my own I simply did not have that much to say that was worthwhile.

I began to realize that my own insights and convictions were not enough. The people I had been called to serve and had learned to love needed more than human answers to human problems. They needed more than a religious version of the common wisdom echoed back to them. They needed something that, left on my own, I could not give them. They needed more than good advice. They needed good news.

An early conversation with a feminist friend was a turning point. With passion and no small hint of exasperation, she said to me, "If Jesus is just another wise teacher, I have no interest at all. I'll be damned if I'm going to let another man tell me how to live my life! If he is not the Son of God, God's Chosen One, the Messiah, then forget about it!" Her words expressed a conviction that began to overtake me.

My work with teenagers brought this realization into clearer focus. To be a minister to youth in the 1970s was to feel as if you had arrived at the site of a large party after almost everyone had left. The remaining few were the hangers-on who didn't know when to go home. Gone were the days when all you had to do was open the door of the church to be knee-deep in kids. Gone too were the days when the church was a social center for the youth. They did not need another place to talk about

current issues--that was happening in the schools and elsewhere.

With perhaps equal parts desperation and conviction, I tried offering a Bible study. To my surprise, the youth dove in with an enthusiasm that they usually reserved for the latest trends. For them this was something new. They were stunningly ignorant of the Bible (one evening I discovered that half of them had never heard the story about Moses and the burning bush), but in some ways that was a distinct advantage. Reading the Bible with fresh eyes, they responded to it as if it were both very odd and surprisingly interesting. They had never heard these stories from their parents, or in school, so they were not as inclined to rebel against them as part of a parental plot to keep them in line. No, this was strange, exotic stuff, and gathering to read it each week seemed off-center enough to appeal to the countercultural impulses of these teenagers. Reading the Bible with them I saw, as if for the first time, that the power in this story is that it says things that cannot be heard anywhere else.

I discovered for myself that the Christian story, for all its familiarity, is perpetually odd. Through my own reading of the Bible I came to know a Jesus who doesn't demonstrate the slightest interest in fitting in. He isn't content with offering some helpful observations about life, but instead invites us to receive a new life. He would rather be odd than relevant, and if we follow him, we risk being odd ourselves. I found this wonderfully freeing. After all, when we observe the deceit, violence and greed of the world, why would we want to fit in?

Most of all, I discovered that the resurrection is not an illustration of anything, but a singular event that is true in a way that reveals that many of our intuitions and experiences are misleading. All the sensible talk and accumulated wisdom of humankind does not prepare us to understand the God that this Jesus reveals. There is a radical discontinuity between the story of this Jesus and what is available to us elsewhere. Instead of concluding, "And perhaps Jesus said it best . . ." we can only say, "You have heard it said . . . but Jesus says to you . . ."

I have not lost interest in ministering to a hurting world. But determination is not enough to sustain compassion. Before we can change the world, we must first submit to change ourselves. Call it conversion.

So I've learned to tend carefully to congregational worship. Our encounter with God through worship is not simply a matter of getting our marching orders, so that we can leave knowing how we are to meet the needs of the world, as the liberal church

that nurtured me seemed to assume. If that were all that were required, then worship would be a simple matter.

But if the claims of those in need have a special claim on those who have encountered God, if the virtues required to address human need are cultivated in the community of faith, if more than being informed we need to be formed into faithful people for the sake of the world, then we will tend carefully to our worship. We will listen to the scriptural story continually, pray countless prayers and sing songs of praise.

I have learned to confront our need for formation in another way. Once I enjoined my congregations to serve the poor, the sick, the vulnerable because they need us. Now I recognize how much we need them. Once I emphasized how much we have to give. Now I freely and joyously recognize how much we will receive.

Often I hear people say things like, "I signed up to help serve meals at the shelter because I wanted to give something back. But in just sitting down and talking with the folks and getting to know them over a period of weeks, I have gotten so much more in return." Although such statements are often made rather apologetically, I have come to see them as more than an expression of our need to feel good about our efforts. Rather, these reflections give testimony to the ways we engage in ministry and enter into relationships in order to be transformed. We are not always the givers; in fact, it is hard to determine who is the giver and who is the receiver because both participate in an endless echo of grace. So I have learned to be outspoken about the needs that we bring to our encounters with others. There is transformative power in being in relationship with those whom God has called blessed.

Such ministries are undertaken not as part of some grand social strategy (it is increasingly clear in any case that it is not our world to run) but because outreach efforts are our opportunity to act out what we believe has happened in the world in Jesus Christ. Through our relationships with those we aim to serve, we can offer a foretaste of the kingdom promised of God. Sometimes the world deems our expressions of care too small to be of consequence, but we remember that Jesus said that the kingdom of God starts as a mustard seed.

There is still a place for political advocacy. Sometimes our encounter with God in worship and our encounter with human need in the world will lead us to involvement

in conventional political activities. During the era that is just now passing, however, it was assumed that such advocacy was a rather simple matter. Since the church assumed that it shared a common story, vision and task with the civic leadership, the church could make its appeals on the basis of what was assumed to be "common sense."

I remember being exhilarated as a teenager by the rallies protesting the Vietnam war--rallies in which church leaders often played a key role. My youthful idealism was fueled by what seemed a growing consensus that war is a brutish and senseless endeavor. During the war in the Persian Gulf, however, I was serving a church in a community where this consensus seemed to have dissipated, if it ever really existed in the first place. The black armbands that were worn during the Vietnam war were replaced by yellow ribbons. I knew that appeals to some generalized notion of justice, or assertions of the senselessness of war, would no longer be convincing. Something else was required.

By this time, I was familiar with Christian thinkers who held a distinctively Christian approach to war. They helped me see that there is an alternative to protesting war based on the destruction it reaps and the innocent people it kills. Christians are called to imitate the ways of the one who was willing to die, though he was innocent, rather than seize power through force, whose answer to violence was the cross. Jesus refused to use conventional political power to accomplish his purposes and instead demonstrated that God deals with evil through self-giving, nonresistant love. It makes no sense in the way we normally calculate things. But in God's design it allowed for the ultimate victory of the resurrection.

This is the message I preached on the eve of the gulf war. To my surprise, the members of my largely conservative congregation were remarkably attentive and receptive to what I had to say, even when they did not end up agreeing with me. A retired army general told me, "I would have walked out of worship that day, but it was clear that while you were making a political stand you were also taking a faith stance."

For me, the excitement of being a Christian has been in discovering the enduring truth and power in the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition. The Christian story is not an extension of human wisdom or an expression of common sense. We cannot pick it up by breathing the air of the wider culture. It must be proclaimed and taught, heard and received.

Gratefully, as a preacher, I learned that I do not need to offer up good advice. Instead, I can proclaim a story that is more odd, more interesting and more exciting than anything I could make up. It is a story that I first heard in that church that sits on the hill, albeit in ways that did not reveal to me the full breadth and depth and height of what I have since discovered.

There is a children's story about a pair of youngsters who happen upon a map that leads to a secret treasure. They leave home and follow clue after clue, have adventure upon adventure, until the map leads them to the treasure, which is buried in their own backyard, where it was all along. And so it has been with me.