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Inconvenient Truths

(Amos 5:18–24 and Colossians 3:1–11)

James F. Kay

James F. Kay, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics, delivered this message in Miller Chapel at the Opening Convocation for the 205th academic year, September 8, 2016.

President Barnes, Faculty and Administrative Colleagues, and Fellow Students: Welcome to the 205th Academic Year of Princeton Theological Seminary. Despite rumors to the contrary, I want to assure you that I have not been *here* all of those years.

What a joy to be back in Miller Chapel. This is the oldest house of worship in continuous use in the old borough of Princeton. What a joy to look out and to see it filled with new life and overflowing with anticipation.

Many of you have come to the Seminary to explore. Perhaps you're asking if God is leading you to a new purpose for your life, for a new mission, a new vocation. So, if you are exploring, Welcome!

Some of you are on a faith journey searching to discover if or how Jesus Christ is relevant to your life, or whether the Christian message is even true, or at least true enough for your full commitment. If you are seeker, Welcome!

Some of you have grown up in the church, and some of you have scarcely any experience of denominational Christianity. Welcome!

Some of you are coming because your lives have already been touched in some way by what the Apostle Paul calls, "the sufferings of this present time" (Rom 8:18)—things like abandonment, abuse, addiction, assault, discrimination, domestic violence, unemployment, or even warfare. Please know that you are not as alone as you may think. So, welcome!

And perhaps at least a few of you, like my colleague John Gilmore, were raised in places like Normal, Illinois, and grew up on Normal Avenue. If that is also your story, Welcome! Welcome to the "new normal!"

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

Tonight, I want to talk about "Inconvenient Truths." It's a way of saying that the apostolic tradition in which we stand and by which we are being saved always reaches us in both redemptive and destructive ways. It comes to us through very fallen, very sinful human witnesses, imperfect vessels to be sure, just like us. And just like us, our mothers and fathers in the faith, including some of the most faithful and heroic in the Bible, and indeed even the Scriptures themselves, were and are embedded in pervasive power dynamics, economic and political systems, in all kinds assumptions and climates of opinion that may well fall short of the

will and way of Jesus Christ. But it is only through such witnesses—fallible to be sure—that we have come to hear of Jesus Christ and to discover the power of his cross and resurrection. And the Good News of the Gospel is that God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved--might be changed, healed, and transformed.

I

In my homiletics seminar, we have a unit on Martin Luther. He both is a grace-filled and very earthy preacher of the gospel. Like Saint Augustine a thousand years before him, Luther, too, is a conversational preacher and usually in very ordinary settings. In one of his sermons from 1539 on the Gospel of John, he reaches out to tormented folks who live constantly in fear of God's judgment. To comfort them, he preaches on the text that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world" (John 3:17), placing the following paraphrase of this text into mouth of Christ himself: "Now the Lord Christ says here: 'We will put an end to such thoughts; God does not want us to entertain them any longer.' . . . The judgment is past. The Father and I condemn no one. God is not angry; for I am the Pledge and the certain Token, yes, the Gift and the Present to show you that God is not angry with us."¹ Luther's sermon brims with sixteenth-century pastoral care to tormented consciences despairing of hope.

And yet, just four years later, in 1543, this same messenger of hope penned one of the most monstrous and vehement anti-Jewish attacks ever written, entitled, "On the Jews and Their Lies." In this treatise he freely offers this advice, "First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss in sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire. . . . Second, that all their books—their prayer books, their Talmudic writings, also the entire Bible—be taken from them, not leaving them one leaf, and that these be preserved for those who may be converted. . . . Third, that they be forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, and to teach publicly among us and in our country. . . . Fourth, that they be forbidden to utter the name of God within our hearing. . . ." ² And so it goes, this anti-Jewish rant, page after page, until our stunned shock gives way to a kind of numbness. How can a man who proclaimed so powerfully the life-giving Word of God be inciting murder if not genocide?

Nevertheless, most of us will come to know about this text only because its Lutheran editors and translators insisted on its publication in the English language edition of *Luther's Works*. They worried, and rightly so, about the "possible misuse of this material," since its horrifying advice had given moral and religious sanction to the architects of the Holocaust. But they courageously decided not to protect Luther's reputation by omitting this treatise from his collected works. Rather, they faced up to an inconvenient truth. They decided not to lie by covering up the truth, but, in their words, "to make available . . . for scholarly study this aspect of Luther's thought, which has played so fateful a role in the development of anti-Semitism in Western culture." They went on to say, "Such publication is in no way intended as an endorsement of the distorted views of Jewish faith and practice or the defamation of the Jewish people which this treatise contains."³ The truth is that the later Luther could no longer theologically imagine a world, as he once could

¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–4*, vol. 22 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 375.

² Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society*, vol. 47 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Franklin Sherman and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 285–86.

³ *Ibid.*, "Introduction," 123.

in 1523, a world free from the defamation of Jews by Christians; a world in which Christians regarded Jews by “the law of Christian love,” the Great Commandment, which, after all, is a gift to Christians and a gift to the world from the Jewish tradition.⁴

As we in the Reformation traditions continue to struggle with this heritage of anti-Judaism on the eve of the Reformation’s 500th Anniversary, I am grateful that here at Princeton, Professor Ellen Charry has been helping us to face such inconvenient truths through her courses on Jews and Judaism in Christian Scripture, on Judaism in Jewish Terms, and through her travel related courses on Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel/Palestine. Thanks to Professor Charry and to her students, some initial faculty conversations will begin this fall so that we do not consciously or unconsciously teach contempt for Jews and Judaism. We face these inconvenient truths together not to wallow in guilt, but to walk in the power of the Gospel by the calling of the law of love.

II

But let’s move on to another remarkable preacher, the eloquent Bishop Jacques Bossuet of France, from the court of Louis XIV. Bossuet, a loyal Roman Catholic, has long delighted English-speaking Protestant historians of preaching. But Bossuet was more than a fawning people pleaser. He was far more than simply one, who in the words of Tom Long, could “sprinkle the fancy perfume of his oratory over the fetid moral lives of various deceased royals and cause them to smell like roses at their own funerals.”⁵

Indeed, Bossuet, especially when a young preacher, was remarkably fearless in politely but pointedly confronting the royal court with a call for compassion and justice for the poor. In March of 1662, at the court of Louis XIV, he was the Lenten preacher. Famine gripped much of the countryside, and many Parisians were reduced to begging. But amid this national calamity, the French court stuck to its routines, anticipating Lent by celebrating three weeks of Carnival with revels unprecedented in their lavishness. So, Bossuet preached strategically before the King and his dissolute courtiers and advisors on, “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” In contrast to his rich listeners, whom Bossuet calls “an unruly rapacious band,” always demanding, “Give us more, give us more” (cf. Prov 30:15), he urges the court to hear

the faint voices of the real poor who tremble before you, who are ashamed of their misery, and who labor unceasingly. They die of starvation; yes, Messieurs, they die for want of food on your estates, at your châteaux, in the villages and fields, in the neighborhood of your mansions and at your very doors. No one goes to their aid. They only beg something out of your superfluity, some crumbs from your table, some remains of your feasts.⁶

Having thrown the book at the King and his court during Lent, on Good Friday he preaches the gospel of the cross—but very much in the mode of a modern liberation theologian. In the small royal chapel furnished with paintings of the crucified Christ, Bossuet implores his listeners:

⁴ Ibid., 124–25.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 183–84.

⁶ Quoted in E. E. Reynolds, *Bossuet* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 45–46.

. . . fix your eyes upon Jesus, and allow yourselves to be touched by the sight of his divine wounds. By that, I am not demanding, Messieurs, that you attentively contemplate some excellent painting of Jesus Christ crucified. I have another painting to propose to you, a painting living and speaking, which conveys a natural expression of the dying Jesus. These are the poor, my Brothers, in whom I urge you to contemplate today the Passion of Jesus. . . Jesus suffers in the poor; he languishes, he is a half-starved wretch within a multitude of poor families. See, then, in the poor, Jesus Christ suffers; and again there we see, for the sake of our misery, Jesus Christ abandoned, Jesus Christ forsaken, Jesus Christ scorned

Since wretchedness increases, it is necessary to extend mercies; . . . Sire, it is Jesus dying who there exhorts you; he commends to you your poor people: . . . bearing the hand of help amid so much distress.⁷

Did Bossuet's preaching do any good? Well, it eventually led the King's mistress Mlle. La Valliere to faith in Jesus Christ and to vocation as a nun, but his urgings to the Bourbon monarch went unheeded. The Sun King had apparently had enough of Bossuet's Lenten preaching and skipped his Easter communion in 1662.

And yet, only two decades later, Bossuet, this eloquent preacher of the social gospel standing up to the King and his court, was now paying homage to Louis XIV as a pious new Constantine for his persecution of the Huguenots. The result was to give moral and religious sanction to what could only be regarded today as "crimes against humanity." One million Protestants, about 15 percent of the French population, were stripped of their long-held rights of assembly, of worship and property. Their church buildings were systematically leveled to the ground. The 1680s knew also the kidnapping of Protestant girls who were taken from their families and placed in convents for re-education as forced conversions became government policy. Such compulsory conversions created a cynical laity within the Roman church. Although illegal, the massive emigration of Calvinists out of the country decimated the ranks of France's hardworking, law-abiding, and economically dynamic middle class. As Father David Tracy of the University of Chicago once said to me, "If Louis XIV had not revoked the edict of Nantes, the first men on the moon would have spoken French!" In hindsight, the French monarchy destroyed the very communities and values by which a civil society can flourish. As with Martin Luther, so with Bossuet we have to temper our temptation to hero worship with an inconvenient truth: Bossuet could not theologically imagine a country in which Catholics and Protestants could live together as fellow Christians, let alone as fellow citizens.

Perhaps some of this program of an absolute monarch sounds familiar: Thousands of people forced to flee the country and limiting the civil rights of religious minorities in the name of national identity and national security. That is why I am grateful to Dr. Nancy Duff for assisting and collaborating with the students from her Bonhoeffer class in sponsoring a conference here at the Seminary on September 29 on "Civil Courage: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Politics Today." What a gathering it will be with Robin Lovin of the Center of Theological Inquiry,

⁷ Jacques Bossuet, "Sermon sur la Passion de Notre-Seigneur," in *Bossuet, Sermons: Le Carême du Louvre, 1662*, ed. Constance Cagnat-Deboeuf (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 270–71; my translation.

Victoria Barnett of the Holocaust Museum, Angela Hancock from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and our own James Deming chairing a panel discussion.

III

But turning from the analogues afforded by the *ancien regime*, what of us here in Princeton, New Jersey? What of us in this venerable bastion of Reformed piety and learning? Precisely because Princeton Seminary will soon be 205 years old, because the Seminary grew up with the young American Republic, the Seminary also grew up in a culture and a church, within a nation and a federal constitution that were inextricably entangled and complicit with the enslavement of African Americans. This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of the American experience and the American experiment.

Within this contradiction there were seemingly moments of truth telling. In 1818, the Presbyterian General Assembly was asked to rule on whether a church member selling a slave, who happened to be a fellow believer, should be brought to discipline if the slave did not wish to be sold. The question was referred to a committee chaired by Ashbel Green, president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, and President of the Seminary's Board of Directors. In his magisterial bicentennial history of the Seminary, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture*, Professor James Moorhead records the stirring introduction to this report:

We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ, which enjoin "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system; it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity.

Professor Moorhead then notes that the report went on to say that it was the "duty of all Christians . . . to use their honest, earnest, and unwearied endeavors to correct the errors of former times, and as speedily as possible to efface this blot on our holy religion, and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom, and if possible throughout the world."⁸

It is at this point in the narrative that an inconvenient truth begins to emerge. Professor Moorhead has to warn his readers, "The level of antislavery commitment behind these stirring

⁸ James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 150; citing *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from Its Organization, A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 688, 692.

words should not be overestimated, for the report made clear that ‘as speedily as possible’ did not mean anytime soon.”⁹ Portions of the report even indicated that the slave owners were victims and should not be harshly censured for being trapped in circumstances that prevented them from freeing their slaves. No wonder Gayraud Wilmore, in his book *Black and Presbyterian*, could declare, “No church was more high-sounding and profound in its theological analysis of slavery and did less about it.”¹⁰ Indeed, the same General Assembly that unanimously approved this report, went on to sustain the removal from the ministry of the Rev. George Bourne of Virginia “for denouncing slave holders as guilty of the worst form of theft—manstealing—and for attacking fellow ministers as complicit in the slave system.”¹¹ So, the one who told truth was kicked out of the ministry.

Last Spring, history Professor Marty Sandweiss of Princeton University shared with our faculty the inconvenient truth that to live in Princeton before the Civil War was to live in a town where enslaved black people were highly visible. The first nine presidents of the college, she reported, all owned slaves, and presumably including Ashbel Green, author of the General Assembly Report of 1818. Likewise, our own founders Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller owned slaves. Visiting Princeton in 1860, you would have found enslaved African Americans working as household servants, toiling in gardens, and laboring in fields. Mrs. Obama has spoken of living in a house built by slaves. Another house, the House of Representatives, located in the Capitol building, was also built by slave labor. While the federal government did not own slaves, it contracted them out from slave owners. We may wonder how many buildings in this community, on the university campus, and on our own campus were built or financed by the labor of slaves. Though there is not much of Miller Chapel that is original, with the exception of its portico, its primary footprint, and the pews in the gallery, could we be worshipping in yet another house, a House of God, built by the hands or on the backs of slaves? At this point, we don’t know. But we intend to find out!

So, we are grateful to President Barnes, who has invited Professor Moorhead, Dr. Yolanda Pierce, Dr. Gordon Mikoski, and Mr. Ken Henke from our Library Archives to engage in vital historical research to find answers to these and other urgent questions. Professor Moorhead’s research seminar this fall on “Princeton Seminary, Slavery and Race” will help us to uncover further inconvenient truths. This is a Christian academic responsibility. In the words of Colossians, to be “raised with Christ,” to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is,” and to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1–2), means that we live on this earth in such a way that we “do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Col 3:9–10). Only by uncovering and facing inconvenient truths, as Georgetown University has recently done, can educational institutions, especially those with a Christian mission, take up the difficult and complex questions of restitution, of reparation, and of reconciliation. Such actions must be the fruit of truth, and the Spirit of truth, and not simply based on guilt or expediency.

⁹ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983), 62; cited by Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary*, 195.

¹¹ Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary*, 151.

Over the years, historical research by Professor Moorhead, Dr. Pierce, Dr. Mikoski, and Professor LaRue have uncovered and brought to our attention the large legacy of Princeton Seminary students. Some, with a boldness lacking in their professors pioneered the abolition of slavery, such as Theodore Sedgwick Wright, our first African American student and graduate of the Seminary in 1828. Like Bossuet, with both politeness and pointedness, Wright opposed his own teacher, Samuel Miller, and all the other supporters of the American Colonization Society. He opposed them, because however well-intentioned their scheme to return freed blacks to Africa, the whole idea represented a failure of theological imagination. To paraphrase Dr. Mikoski, “They could not theologically imagine a country where blacks and whites could ever live together in harmony.” And to Wright’s name we could add others: Elijah Parish Lovejoy, pastor and editor turned abolitionist; Francis James Grimke, Class of 1878, twice sold into slavery, freed after the Civil War, pastor of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, and a founding member of the NAACP; and, James Reeb, Class of 1953, whose murder in Selma, Alabama, hastened the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Given this record by our students, and I have only named a few, Professor Moorhead observes that “one is struck by the extent to which the choices and commitments of students themselves shaped the extracurricular part of their education and hence much of what they took away from Princeton.”¹² As I look out tonight on new students entering the Seminary, I am more aware than ever that what you *bring* to this place in interaction with your learned professors may well lead you, and them, the Seminary, and the country itself into a future that we cannot tonight fully imagine. So, again, Welcome!

IV

Let me close with a true story about a Princeton Seminary student from the Class of 1905. He was a cowboy from Dripping Springs, Texas, John William Harris, who went by the name of “Will.” At 16, while out on the range surrounded by 3,000 sleeping sheep, Will had a dream. God was speaking to him between the rifts in the clouds. Like the people to whom Luther preached, Will heard a voice of judgment: “Thou shalt be punished for the iniquity thou hast done.” Somewhat startled into serious reflection, he began to read the Bible, was eventually baptized, and admitted into the Presbyterian Church. A pastor, who had been sent from Pennsylvania to convert cowboys, persuaded Will to go on for higher education and to prepare for the ministry. So, at 19, he renounced his “hope of someday of being governor of Texas and also the hope of owning a big cattle ranch.” He writes, “I surrendered unconditionally to God, then and there, once and forever. This I did. I only asked to have the conscious presence of God with me, and strength to do his will as He would reveal that will to me, day by day. I promised him I would never stop and would try to do the impossible without doubting, if he would only go with me. His promise was, ‘I am with you always.’”¹³

While preparing for Seminary at Park College in Missouri, Will Harris had a second vision. In this dream, he was walking down the Burlington Railroad along the Missouri River, when, in his words, “a young man touched me and said, ‘Come with me.’ I followed him as he called my

¹² *Ibid.*, 87–88.

¹³ See *Riding and Roping: The Memoirs of J. Will Harris*, ed. C. Virginia Matters, Centennial Edition (San Juan: Editorial Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, 2012), 3–14.

attention to the turbulent river that now splashed at our feet. It was filled a half-mile wide with white, black, brown, red children, chattering, laughing in the water up to their arm pits. . . . He said to me, ‘This a vision of the people among whom you are to live and work.’”¹⁴

Because he spoke Spanish and could ride a horse, this cowboy ended up not back in Texas as he had planned, but assigned instead by the Presbyterian Board of National Missions to Puerto Rico. Will was determined to start a school. In accordance with his vision, he imagined a school for children of all races and ethnicities, whether Protestant or Catholic, and it would be a school where the students would pay their way by working with their hands just as he had done at Park College. Will found an abandoned school house, really more of a shack, and, in 1912 the dream came true near San Germán, in the mountains of southwestern Puerto Rico. The first day two students enrolled. One went back home discouraged. One stayed. But Will called it a great success!

Will was told his dream would never work in Puerto Rico. “Racial integration-- not on the agenda.” “Co-education in a Hispanic culture, impossible!” “Gentlemen don’t work with their hands; that’s only for peasants, for laborers!” And, “Catholics and Protestants studying together! Unheard of!”

One hundred years later in 2012, around the used brick stairs which had once led up to the original one-room elementary school, some 14,000 citizens and guests gathered at San Germán to dedicate a new centenary plaza in honor of Will Harris. That primary school with one student is now the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, The Inter American University of Puerto Rico. It has nine campuses throughout the island. With about 50,000 students, it is reportedly the largest private University in the Western Hemisphere.

Later in 2012, during the Seminary’s bicentennial, I was privileged to stand in the main entrance of Hodge Hall--not far from Will’s dorm room. A large delegation was walking across the quad and beginning to pour into Hodge Hall. They were on their way to the dedication of two plaques in Will’s honor--one in Spanish and one in English. The delegation was led by a distinguished jurist, Luis A. Plaza Mariota, the Roman Catholic chair of the Board. In the throng of administrators, including President Manuel Fernós, trustees, and former students of the *Interamericana*, there were people of darker and lighter skins, both women and men, both Protestants and Catholics. And together, with some of Will’s descendants, a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter, as the plaques were unveiled, we all gave thanks for John William Harris, Princeton Theological Seminary, Class of 1905.

And tonight, we also give thanks and praise that Christ is alive, that Christ is yet with us in and above a world that still awaits the transformations of the Gospel of God. Tonight, we give special thanks for you who are new students; thanks for what you will bring to this place; and thanks for what you will take from this place. For Christ still leads students *to* Princeton and *from* Princeton: Christians of all kinds, from all places on six continents, sometimes, as unbelievable as it may sound, even a cowboy from Dripping Springs, Texas. Yes, in every generation students are led here and *from* here to do things beyond all reckoning. And, *that’s the gospel truth!* May God’s grace enable us all to live into this truth—however inconvenient.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¡*Bienvenidos!* Welcome!

Dreams and Realities of Community

(Ephesians 4:1–6)

M. Craig Barnes

M. Craig Barnes, President and Professor of Pastoral Ministry, delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel at the Opening Communion service for the fall semester, September 9, 2016.

The third chapter of Ephesians concludes with a few words of blessing: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

This blessing means at least two things to us as a community. The first is that there is a holy power at work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than we can even ask or imagine. The second is that the glory belongs to *God*—in the church.

Notice that Paul does not say that the church is a place of glory. Two thousand years of history have made it clear that the glory is not the church or its schools. But to God be the glory *in* the church. Therefore, the text proclaims, since God is at work and there is abundant power at work in the church, be sure that you are leading a life worthy of your calling.

Now there are lots of callings in life. There is the calling to family, to work, to health. There is the calling to the environment and to the poor. Yet the greatest calling of all is to glorify and enjoy God. Therefore, as Paul says, as you fulfill your callings as students, professors, and administrators at the Seminary be sure that above all we are seeking to glorify God in all that we do. We live out of this promise: to God be the glory in the church.

The text then takes a funny turn as the Apostle tells us how we will lead a life worthy of this calling. The way we do that is with “all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

How do we find such tender virtues?

Don’t worry—just stay in community for any length of time, and you will have plenty of opportunities to discover humility, plenty of opportunities to demonstrate gentleness, plenty of need for patience, plenty of calling to forbear one another with love and to engage in the hard, hard work of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We are a people who discover every day our need for the grace of God and the need to extend that grace to others—and the need to ask it of others. And when you leave this place and begin your ministry, you will find this is your daily challenge. You will spend the rest of your life giving the grace of God to others in need of it. This Seminary is a lab school where we become good at the giving and receiving of grace.

At the center of this community is the claim that we are of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, while we take differences very seriously. We have different theologies, different races, different

genders, different orientations, different first languages, and very different stories. If we take hundreds of very different students and add very different faculty members and add very different administrators and staff, it won't be long before somebody hurts somebody else, before somebody makes a mistake or commits a sin against another. We will commit sins of omission and commission because we are flawed people, bound together in residential community. But as these sins are confronted and confessed and grace is given, transformation occurs. This is how God shapes leaders for the church. It's probably not the kind of community you dreamed to come to.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us, there is nothing more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams for it because we will always love our dreams more than the community in which God has placed us. Once again, the glory is not in the church but in the God who is in the church.

This way of demonstrating our calling through humility, gentleness, forbearance, and forgiveness is not how I would have thought the ambitious Apostle Paul would have advised us to fulfill our calling. Most churches don't think this way. If you were to interview with a pastoral search committee and they ask you to describe something about yourself, imagine what would happen if you were to say, "my most significant attribute is humility. And gentleness is a close second. And what I would love to do is to help you become a humble church." That's not what they want to hear. What they want you to say is that you have a vision for making them into a great church. But the greatness, the power, the glory for which the church yearns is only found when it becomes a realm of redemption, and it can only do that by the God who is at work within it.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel said that when two people come together a creative space is found between them. It is in this space that the Creator continues the ongoing transformation of each of them. But if someone walks away, then the creative space is also lost. Jesus Christ said that when two or three are gathered in his name he will also be in their midst. And wherever Jesus is present in a community, it is a realm of redemption, a place where people can learn how to forgive, to bear with one another in love. Then the community is free—free to do justice, free to fall in love with mercy, and free to walk more humbly. And when we engage in the doing of justice, the daily loving of mercy, walking humbly among each other, then the glory of God is revealed.

Deadly and Life-Giving Words

(James 3:1–12)

Eric D. Barreto

Eric D. Barreto, Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament, delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel at the Opening Communion service for the spring semester, January 24, 2017.

I didn't know I was Puerto Rican when I was a toddler. When I was learning words and shaping them into sentences, I didn't know I was speaking Spanish. When I was little, I was unaware of the wider world around me, that there were people called different names, speaking different words, and seeing the world very differently than I did.

I became suspicious that the world was bigger than my world in elementary school. I went to kindergarten with the children of soldiers who happened to be stationed in Puerto Rico. These kids were different. They spoke English at home. They ate things like peanut butter and jelly. They ate things like meatloaf. And strangest of all, their homes had central air conditioning; the first time I stepped into a home cooled to 72 degrees I thought, "These people must be crazy. How do they live like this?" In those days, discovering new words, new ideas, new possibilities was eye-opening, life-giving. As children, we tended to delight in each other's stories, each other's words.

As you might have guessed, such wonder did not last long. I was suspicious in elementary school that the world was bigger. The fact that the world was bigger hit me in the face in middle school and high school. I was no longer in Puerto Rico. We lived in Louisiana and in Missouri and in Kansas. As an adolescent, I no longer delighted in my differences and those of others. I wanted to be like the majority of the kids that surrounded me, so much so that I would purposefully purse my lips to narrow them. I wanted to fit in more than anything. And words were used to harm me, to tell me I had no place, to tell me I didn't belong, to tell me that I had to change who I was to be loved.

In our text today, James warns us about the dangers of language—the way words can worm their way into our hearts and leave only death and distrust in their wake.

Anyone who has been at the receiving end of a bully's words knows that words are as blunt as stones, as sharp as a honed stick. We should know better than to repeat the old adage about sticks and stones, but we don't seem to grasp fully the power of words.

James 3:1–12 speaks to these realities in a vivid way. An extended reflection on the power teachers hold because of the might and danger of words, this passage compares the power of words to the destruction and proliferation of a fiery blaze. Not many should strive to be teachers, James instructs, because the office is rife with temptations. After all, the tongue—though diminutive—can lead us astray as easily as a rudder steers a ship. Our tongues can ignite a raging inferno that no one can extinguish.

The teachers James imagines are not mere dispensers of knowledge. Indeed, if we imagine that is what teachers and professors do all day, we are seriously missing the point of teaching. Instead, James imagines that teachers are communal leaders called by God to shape communities of faith that reflect the goodness and grace of that all-loving God. Such teachers do not hide behind pulpits and podiums nor are they content merely to deliver lofty lectures. The kind of teachers James hopes for instead rub shoulders with people, live in the midst of their struggles, share their griefs and joys alike. Such teachers are living examples of a life of faithful service to one's sisters and brothers.

Not many should strive to be such teachers, such leaders. This is true. The power is too great for many of us. The temptation to use our words for our own gain too tantalizing. Words are potent weapons in the hands of those who crave their power. Words are harmful whenever we wield them for our own gain and not the building up of others. Words are deadly when they deny whom God has made us to be. Words are corrosive when their meanings are twisted, used for deceptive ends. Words are caustic when they tap into our crudest instincts: fear, narcissism, self-hatred.

James is right. The tongue is a fire, its flames spreading wherever it can find a source of fuel. Literal fires thirst for oxygen. The fires ignited by half-truths and prejudice have their own potent source of energy: fear of the other, anxiety over the future, an overestimation of our own holiness and the errors of our supposed opponents.

According to James, we speak with a fundamental contradiction. With the same mouth, we praise and curse God. With the same tongue, we decry and uplift our neighbor. With the same words, we can help others or crush their hopes.

James suggests that there is never a relationship between humans and God that is not at the very same time manifest and embodied in our relationships with our sisters and brothers. In James, sin, suffering, and illness are communal hardships just as much as they are individual ills. Their alleviation is affected through communal liturgies as much as personal confession. None of us—no matter our importance in the world—are independent, unfazed atoms. Instead, we are links in an unbreakable chain. For James, there is no knowledge of God that does not force an individual to gaze into the eyes of another person and recognize her inextricable connection to others in Christian community.

In short, we are always and inevitably bound to our neighbors.

We know too well, in recent days, how right James was and is. Our words are dangerous even when they seem innocuous; our words can even be deadly even when they seem gentle. In response to the Black Lives Matter movement, some have retorted that all lives matter. That is true, of course. Ours is a God who revels in our differences and loves the particularities that makes all of our lives such reflections of God's creativity. But in wanting to silence the voices of protest, in seeking to contradict the voices that ring out "black lives matter," we miss the radical edge of such a statement. Isn't it strange that we would need to say that "black lives matter?" Shouldn't that be self-evident? Shouldn't that be obvious? To say "black lives matter" is not to diminish the value of others. It is to remind us that "black lives matter" is not yet true in our

midst. It is to remind us that our words and our deeds tell our black sisters and brothers that they in fact do not matter to us.

So, if our words are so dangerous, perhaps we should simply stop speaking. If all we will do is harm others or stumble in trying to understand or speak our way into racial conflicts, then perhaps we should just keep our mouths closed for good. Yet as much as our tongues can set a blaze of destruction, our silence can still cause a subtle spark no less deadly. Our silence is dangerous even when it is well-intentioned. Our silence can be deadly even when we think we are seeking peace.

And here we are at the beginning of a new semester. Training you with words, demanding you to respond with words in class discussions and precept prompts and final essays. And, yes, even there our words can be deadly. We can caricature our theological opponents, lying about their perspectives. We can speak in offensive and violent ways about women and people of color, putting into words the daily violence some of us experience simply because of who we are or how we embody our gender and race. And there too we can be silent. We can deny that we have anything to add to the lofty discussions going on around us and, in doing so, deny God's call upon our lives. We can deny that we have anything to learn from those who see the world differently than we do. We can deny that some cultures, some peoples, some theologies have very little to teach us.

With the same mouth, we worship God and condemn our neighbor. With the same mouth, we praise the Creator of the universe and tell some that they have no place here. With the same mouth, we sing the wonders of God and reject that we need one another—that God has drawn us together.

And this morning we confess our complicity in systems of exclusion. This morning we speak our sanction of oppression. This morning we seek God's forgiveness with the same mouth that has spoken death to the other. And this morning God will reconcile. God will forgive. God will show us a way. God will call us to use the same mouth that has spoken rejection to speak words of confession and forgiveness. And in the shadow of God's forgiveness, we will be freed to speak the truth that we are all wonderfully and marvelously and differently made.

And with the power of God, the love of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit, words meant to kill and harm just might transform into words that speak of God's resurrection power. James concludes, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh." It seems impossible. But with God it is not only possible—it is promised.

Populism, Patriotism, and the Preacher

Angela Dienhart Hancock

Angela Dienhart Hancock, Associate Professor of Homiletics and Worship at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, delivered this lecture during the fall conference, “Civil Courage: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Politics Today.” This conference, held in September 2016, focused on ways the church could address the disturbing rhetoric of the U.S. presidential campaign. This version of her lecture has been revised since the 2016 presidential election, but full audio and video of the original lecture is available on our [Multimedia page](http://av.ptsem.edu) (<http://av.ptsem.edu>).

We dread presidential election years in my house. As the only Democrats in a fervently Republican extended family, my husband and I brace ourselves for the inevitable email forwards pointing out the error of our ways. We receive books in the mail from well-meaning relations—books about how liberals are ruining America, and by extension, the world. We can count on phone calls that feature laments about taxes, environmental regulation, health care reform, education, terrorism—phone calls that will end up in a heated partisan stalemate if you don’t have the self-control to change the subject quickly enough. Visits with my parents, especially in election years, require pre-visit talks in which my husband and I remind each other that nothing good will come from talking about politics or religion. Don’t take the bait, we urge each other, it just ruins everything and changes nothing.

Last fall things were different. Quieter. No books in the mailbox. Friendly phone conversations with minimal lament. Only one provocative email forward. We should have felt relieved, I suppose, but somehow, we didn’t. Radio silence is not necessarily a good sign, as that lone email forward—replete with its conspiracy theories—amply demonstrated. Our complete inability to find any political common ground in my extended family is even more mystifying when you consider that we all ostensibly share some pretty significant theological common ground. Every last one of us disciples of Jesus Christ, active in churches rooted in the same tradition, reciting the same creeds, singing the same hymns, reading the same Bible. We all fall into the category so scrutinized by pollsters minding the “God gap”—that is, we all attend religious services at least once a week. So, how is it possible that we are completely unable to talk theologically about politics?

Searching for an answer to that question is one of many things that led me to study the political behavior of the German church in the 1920s and 30s, and the theologians who either blessed or challenged the conflation of Christianity and nationalism at that time and place. Why did the Christians in Germany see the same political developments so very differently? Why did so few recognize the danger posed by National Socialism? Is there anything we might learn from that situation in the midst of this troubling political season in our own country? How can preachers and other concerned Christians be courageous civil witnesses at such a time as this?

LOOKING BACK

In many ways the average German protestant of the 1920s was primed to respond to the appeals of the parties of the right. Raised as loyal subjects of a monarch, many were skeptical of democracy. Humiliated by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, many were angry, bitter, demoralized. Enduring the trauma of hyperinflation and appallingly high unemployment, many watched savings dwindle away. And they also had one eye fixed on Russia, and all that had happened there: a government overthrown, a brutal civil war, the story of the night Bolshevik soldiers dragged the former royal family from their beds and shot them in the basement. Countless Russian civilians had been tortured and killed, property confiscated. The stories haunted the German imagination. The formation of the German Communist Party in 1918 and the scattered revolutionary uprisings from the left which occurred in Germany in 1918–19 only increased the anxieties. Even the Social Democrats who supported moderate reform rather than revolution would be regarded with suspicion by right-wing Germans from then on. Day after day the newspapers fueled German anxieties about Communist violence—nothing sells papers like fear.

So the average German had three questions which became more pressing with each election cycle: Who is to blame for the mess we are in? Who can prevent a Russian-style revolution? Who can restore Germany to its former God-ordained glory? Answers to these questions, then, were what Germans listened for as they evaluated political parties. They sought the most satisfying answers in relation to blame, protection, and restoration.

The parties of the right had clear responses to these concerns, and the National Socialists in particular had a winning formula. Blame for German troubles largely fell on two categories of people: 1) those with suspected loyalties to something other than the German nation: Communists, Socialists, Catholics, Jews, foreigners, and pacifists; 2) those perceived as “elites” in German society, including the liberal politicians associated with Weimar democracy, and again, Jews. The National Socialists convinced more and more people that they were the only ones capable of protecting Germany from Communist aggression. And Hitler certainly offered a positive vision of a new Reich, glorious again.

Of course, every political party in the Weimar Republic identified enemies, placed blame, and promised a better tomorrow. Competition for votes was fierce. Military metaphors, hyperbole, slogans, insults, dire predictions and threats were everywhere, mixed with sweeping utopian promises. From 1931 to the end of the Weimar Republic, as the depression deepened and the violence escalated, politicians, the press, and the regular people engaged in an all-out war of words. Public spaces were plastered and re-plastered with campaign posters, party “gangs” looked for trouble in the alleyways, uniformed party militias marched through the streets as if to war, and the papers screamed partisan accusations. Pathos was everywhere. How did the German Protestant church react to all of this?

By 1931, many were torn between appreciation for much of the Nazi platform and discomfort with their coarse rhetoric and aggressive style of campaigning. Though there were a minority of left leaning clergy who voiced opposition to the Führer and his ideas, there was little common ground on which the right and left wings of Protestantism could test the political spirits together. There was no sense of a shared Christian identity that transcended partisan political

commitments. Consciously and unconsciously the church's language about God and itself had been infiltrated by the dominant political rhetoric of the day. The language of *Volk* and *Kampf* permeated everything.

Why did most Protestants support right wing political parties? For the same reasons other Germans did. They longed for rebirth, renewal, revival, community, strong leadership, and unity. Taking their country back, making it great again. And along with those shared longings, references to the "unGerman" enemies of the *Volk* were usually not far behind. The doctrine of the orders of creation gave the dominant faction in German Protestantism a theological reason to sanctify the nationalism it felt so deeply.

Everyone who has spoken at this conference has rightly been very careful not to make any simple comparison between Germany in the early 1930s and the situation we face in the United States. We are not in a fledgling democracy. We should not cry "Hitler," of course. And yet. There are some undeniable resonances between there and here.

THE RACE TO THE WHITE HOUSE 2016

The vitriol of the 2016 presidential election campaign was hardly unprecedented in US history. Looking back at posters, speeches, cartoons, debates, of presidential campaigns over the past 200 years, there has been plenty of mud-slinging, insults, racism, blasphemy, xenophobia, sexism, hostility to immigrants, prophecies of doom, and downright lies. And we are by no means strangers to this kind of combative speech. Angry, aggressive, fact-challenged, hate-filled messages are commonplace just on the edge of official public life: the tee shirts for sale at the Tea Party kiosk, those offensive yard signs your neighbor gleefully posts from time to time, the venomous hyperbole spewing from trolls of every political persuasion on a website or twitter feed near you. We've known all this has been out there for a long time, and we may even slightly enjoy a little disruptive speech ourselves when the target is one we share.

What has changed is not the presence of such rhetorical tropes and transgressive images in American society but the fact that they issued forth from the nominee of a major political party. What has changed is that the hate speech we tolerate at the margins has moved to the center, and the usual way we informally and communally regulate the tenor of public speech has neither tempered these tactics nor discouraged would-be supporters. This time, nothing appears to be out of bounds.

It is hard not to be reminded of 1932, at least in this respect: we have a right-wing candidate—now President—who has enjoyed a rapid ascent to political legitimacy, who taps into already existing animosities toward government, minorities, and immigrants. Some of those most drawn to this figure and his promises have some real grievances. They have borne the negative consequences of decisions re: trade, etc. that have arguably benefitted the whole. There is a longing for restoration of the nation to what they understand as better times. And they have found someone who gives voice to all of these feelings and desires, even if statistics show some are uncomfortable with the way he does it. And every terrorist action, no matter how minor in effect, reinforces all of the above. Blame. Protection. Restoration.

So what is a concerned Christian to do? Join in the fray with some heated rhetoric of our own? Preach a jeremiad, denounce the deplorables, warn of the impending apocalypse? These are tempting options. But here, I think, is where two theologians who resisted National Socialism and its rhetoric—Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—have some wisdom to offer.

BARTH AND BONHOEFFER ON POLITICAL RHETORIC

Karl Barth was keenly aware of the power of political rhetoric. At the time Barth was working on the second edition of his Romans commentary, in the early 1920s, two political developments weighed heavily on his mind: German church support for the war effort and the grim aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution. The rhetoric that went along with these developments was full of pathos, Barth observed. By “pathos” he meant particularly religious “passion” for a political cause.¹ To speak with “sacred” pathos about a political conviction is to invest that conviction with eternal weight, to baptize it with absolute import, to grant it ultimacy. Barth heard this kind of sacred pathos coming from German nationalists blessing the war effort and from revolutionaries, overthrowing their oppressors.

But Barth has what seems like a counter-intuitive response to this kind of sacred political rhetoric. Instead of holding forth with your own sacred rhetoric in return, deprive them of their pathos, Barth writes. If you mirror the absolutism of ideologues, you will only give them fresh fodder, feed the flames. Instead, when you engage with political zealots, take eternal significance off the table. Starve them by withholding the opposition they crave. It is a strategy of non-violent resistance that meets the pathos of conservatism with what Barth calls the “Great Positive Possibility”—love of the other—and not with the pathos of revolution, which returns evil for evil.² If we acknowledge that our political judgments are always provisional, relative, partial attempts to discern what is good, then “pathos” in substance or in style would not be a faithful witness to the Godness of God.

Barth argued that when political views are held with deadly “eternal” seriousness, neither critical distance nor reasoned conversation about politics are possible. For Barth, the Christian community is called to be a witness in the political realm, to participate in public conversation with “a critical yet comprehensive generosity,” not from “outside” the world but from within, because both church and world are sustained by God’s reconciling grace.³

But to press Barth further, what does political conversation sound like when Christians wholeheartedly engage in public issues without absolutist rhetoric, particularly in the context of a democracy? We shall see.

At the University of Bonn in 1932, Barth volunteered to teach a course on how to prepare a sermon. It was an odd thing for him to do—after all, he was already teaching more than a full load, and someone else was already teaching the homiletics course. But that someone was a Nazi

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 235.

² *Ibid.*, 492. This love of the other “ought to be undertaken as the protest against the course of this world, and it ought to continue without interruption.”

³ Karl Barth, CD IV.3.2, 771.

sympathizer, and Barth felt that given the state of preaching at the time, intervention was warranted.

Broadly speaking, Protestant preachers in Germany thought that it was part of their calling to influence public life—morally, ethically, and politically. By the early 1930s, conversions of the political sort were impossible to ignore as young people rallied to the National Socialist cause. Many pastors had a nagging feeling that the “spirit” so evident on the streets was marching right past the Protestant church. What could they do?

Some of the sermons that survive from that time were clearly designed to urge support for the nationalist political cause. It is this instrumental understanding of the sermon—when preachers wield the Word of God like a weapon to achieve political ends—that Barth was concerned about when he talked to his students about the nature of preaching in 1932. As the Weimar Republic limped toward its demise, Barth increasingly argued for the freedom of the Word in contrast to the agenda-driven German Protestant sermon, so concerned with “relevance.”

But what does Barth suggest his young students do instead? Turn from the claustrophobic fixation on the German narratives of blame, protection, restoration and open themselves and their hearers to the wide, critical, and eschatological horizon the witness of the Scripture could provide. Barth insisted that the Old and New Testaments could move preacher (and hearer) from the narrowness of *Volk*, nation, and race to the wide-angle lens of God’s way with humanity. This did not mean he thought Scripture would have nothing to say in relation to Germany in 1932, indeed he told them, “application” to here and now was not only crucial, but would require “civil courage.” But discerning God’s claim here and now required renewed attention to how we listen to the witness of Scripture, especially when sacred political rhetoric has taken hold of us. And that brings us to Bonhoeffer.

Ten years after the National Socialist revolution, Bonhoeffer wrote a searching letter to friends from his prison cell, reflecting on all that had happened in Germany.⁴ The first thing that struck me as I re-read Bonhoeffer’s letter (known as “After Ten Years”) in relation to our present situation was his meditation on stupidity. “Stupidity,” he wrote, “is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice.”

What does Bonhoeffer mean by “stupidity”? The stupid person, he says, is impervious to reasons, facts, explanations. The stupid person has predetermined what is good and right and true, and no amount of protest or power can change that. Even if the facts of a counter-argument are irrefutable, the stupid person will simply dismiss them as irrelevant. To try and change such a person’s mind by giving reasons is pointless, and Bonhoeffer says, dangerous. Stupidity is not so much an intellectual issue (lots of smart people are stupid, he notes)—people are made stupid by external conditions, by other people, by historical circumstances, especially in relation to what he calls an “upsurge of power” in a political or religious context. “The power of the one needs the stupidity of others,” he observes, and it is not difficult to hear the reference to Hitler.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, Ilse Tödt, and John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 37–52.

Stupid persons will be very stubborn about their views, even aggressive, but we should not confuse this with independence. Rather, Bonhoeffer sees stupid people as victims—under a spell, blinded, captured, abused. Talking to them is not really talking to *them*, Bonhoeffer says, because all they can do is repeat the slogans, sound bites, talking points, of the rhetoric which has possessed them.

It turns out that there is actually a significant amount of empirical research to back up Bonhoeffer's claims about how partisans behave. People who identify strongly with a political party are not persuaded to alter their views by rational arguments, not even when confronted with indisputable evidence. In the fields of moral and evolutionary psychology, research has established what happens in the human brain when presented with a moral or ethical issue. It turns out that nearly all people have an immediate intuitive reaction to such a dilemma, and then they construct a rational argument which justifies their intuitive reaction.

Where do these intuitions come from? They are formed over time. Shaped by what we are exposed to. And what we are exposed to depends in part on what we choose to be exposed to and how we interpret what we encounter. The dynamic known as "confirmation bias" is the tendency we all have to seek out, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs. While Bonhoeffer contends that a "solitary" person is more resistant to stupidity on account of the absence of peer pressure, today we may need to qualify that. It seems a "solitary" person can be ideologically hijacked just as easily in front of laptop screen or cradling a smartphone as in the company of others.

But Bonhoeffer was right: especially in the context of absolutist rhetoric, we will not be able to argue our way to agreement. And it's important to note that although Bonhoeffer is exasperated with the stupid people of his day, he ends his discussion on a more positive note. Stupidity is not a permanent condition. It infects some of the people some of the time. And there is always that hope that liberation will come.

Bonhoeffer's diagnosis was that most of those made stupid in the Third Reich would not be liberated internally until they were liberated externally, but he leaves open the possibility that the "fear of the Lord" could lead to wisdom, even in captivity.

A moment ago I spoke about Barth's discussion of the wide horizon of Scripture, and the way it provides crucial perspective in relation to our more "local" political standoffs. But in "After Ten Years," Bonhoeffer subtly prompts an important question in relation to the wide horizon: who do we stand for and with as we point to the story that qualifies and relativizes all the stories we tell to justify our intuitions? Bonhoeffer calls us to stand alongside, with, and for the particular others who are, as he describes it, "below," that is, to stand with those who suffer. We are not Christ, redeeming the world, but we are called to the "true sympathy" grounded in Christ's love for all who suffer. We can be called to sympathy and subsequent action second-hand, by hearing about experiences of others, Bonhoeffer writes.

In the little paragraph eventually published along with "After Ten Years," Bonhoeffer expresses gratitude that he has learned to see "the great events of history" from the perspective of the "outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled." It is a list we

can easily populate with the groups and individuals demonized in the heated rhetoric endemic to our current political climate. Does it seem odd that the same Bonhoeffer who describes many of his contemporaries as “stupid people” would go on to lift up sympathy as essential Christian response to others?

But Bonhoeffer not only calls for sympathy toward those who suffer, for those experiencing history from below, but also for the very people who have been made stupid. In a different way they too are victimized, he thinks, and this is important when we consider how far our sympathy should extend to those we disagree with today. Bonhoeffer gives us no justification for the demonization of those in ideological captivity. Love, he writes, is “the will to enter into and keep community with them,” that is, with those we might be tempted to despise. The very ones who express views we find deplorable. Impossible! Yet Bonhoeffer reminds us that “through contempt for humanity we fall victim precisely to our opponents’ chief errors.”

From Barth and Bonhoeffer then, we have heard some advice for resisting sacred rhetoric: With these gleanings in mind and our present political situation in view, we are ready to be concrete: what specifically is a preacher to do at such a time as this?

PREACHING IN THE KEY OF GRACE

We might begin by considering what a preacher *can* do, legally speaking. Some of you may be familiar with the 1954 change to the U.S. tax code known as The Johnson Amendment. The amendment states that 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations cannot campaign for a particular political candidate, nor can they intervene in a campaign to stop a particular political candidate—they cannot endorse or oppose candidates with their written or spoken words nor with their money. The penalty for violating the amendment is possible loss of tax-exempt status.

What does the Johnson Amendment mean for churches and preachers? Preachers cannot endorse or oppose particular candidates for office, nor can the church engage in activities that demonstrate bias for or against particular candidates. But pastors can take positions on political issues and preach about them, and congregations can host non-partisan voter registration drives, present public forums on political issues, invite candidates to speak (if all are invited), and publish what are known as “voter guides,” as long as they focus on issues and information rather than advocating for or against candidates.

For many of us, wary of campaigning for specific candidates anyway, the amendment isn’t anything to get worked up about. In a very recent Pew survey, about two-thirds of all churchgoers agree—they don’t think that churches should endorse particular candidates, though more than half think it is good for churches to discuss social and political issues.⁵

In light of this data, it is odd that in recent years, this fairly obscure scrap of the tax code has become a cause célèbre for certain right-wing Christian groups. The Alliance Defending Freedom was founded by 30 conservative evangelicals in 1994 in order to fund legal action to

⁵ “Many Americans Hear Politics From the Pulpit,” Pew Research Center, last modified November 2, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/08/many-americans-hear-politics-from-the-pulpit/>. In the same survey, more than one third said they have heard preachers talk about political issues in the last few months, but only ten percent have heard a sermon which included support for or advised against supporting a particular presidential candidate.

fight what they perceived as growing threats to what they call “religious freedom.” Among their targets: the Johnson Amendment. Every year since 2008, the group has encouraged pastors to participate in “Pulpit Freedom Sunday” by endorsing a political candidate from the pulpit during a Sunday worship service and then sending a video record of the event to the IRS, in hopes that punitive action and presumably a public outcry would follow. How many churches were penalized for violating the amendment on Pulpit Freedom Sunday so far? Zero. Instead, they received a form letter from the IRS, thanking them for their interest.

So it is likely a preacher *can* get away with using the pulpit to denounce one candidate and/or endorse another.⁶ But in the context of a political environment rife with partisan rhetoric already, that doesn’t mean preachers should. And what are we to make of the fact that most of the people who actually go to church, right and left, would rather preachers didn’t? To answer that question, we need to look more closely at who is in the pews.

On average, only about fifty-five percent of the Americans who are eligible to vote for president do. Churchgoers are somewhat more likely to vote than non-churchgoers, but still, it means that a certain percentage of the people in church on any given Sunday don’t pay much attention to politics. Maybe they’ve got a lot of things going on—or maybe they are so cynical about the whole enterprise that they tune it out.

For those of us who are very attentive to every development in domestic politics, it is good to remember that there may be others in the sanctuary who are not invested to the same degree. Of course, that number will vary from congregation to congregation. You may be a part of a local church that identifies itself with the left or the right, theologically and politically. That doesn’t mean there aren’t outliers there, but statistically churches that embrace an activist or advocate stance attract others who lean in the same general direction. In a congregation that does not land somewhere definite on the political landscape, or that identifies itself explicitly as a theologically and politically diverse community, things are more complicated. In some churches it can be difficult for pastors to find out exactly what church attendees think about social and political issues because everyone is so careful to preserve the peace. A Facebook post, an email forward, a whispered comment after the service—these may be the only clues to political persuasion unless you pursue the matter one on one. Sometimes you won’t get the full picture even then. In other places there are a few boisterous partisans (and sometimes more than a few) who are open about their political convictions, but this may discourage rather than encourage others to share their views.

So, why don’t churchgoers want pastors to endorse particular political candidates in their sermons? There could be many reasons, some I’m sure bound up with perceptions about what it

⁶ On May 4, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order (Exec. Order No. 13,798, 82 Fed. Reg. 21675) instructing the Secretary of the Treasury to ensure that the Department of the Treasury does not take “adverse action” against religious individuals or organizations who speak about moral or political issues where such speech has “not ordinarily been treated as participation or intervention in a political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) a candidate for public office by the Department of the Treasury.” This does not constitute the repeal of the Johnson Amendment (something which the President does not have the authority to do), but appears to affirm the existing practice of non-enforcement. For the full text of the May 4 executive order see: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/04/presidential-executive-order-promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty>.

means to preach the gospel. But one reason that makes sense to me has to do with what is likely to happen in the different kinds of churches I just described. If you are addressing a politically *homogenous* congregation, then endorsing a candidate is just preaching to the choir. If you are addressing even a minimally politically *diverse* congregation, by making that explicitly partisan move you are putting the “bully” back in “bully pulpit.” Neither one of those paths is particularly courageous or unique in our present rhetorical environment, where pastors regularly endorse candidates during campaign seasons, making it clear which team is your team, drawing the line between comrades and enemies. So if not endorsement, what is a preacher to do? A preacher who knows something must be said at such a time as this? A few suggestions:

Be a window, not a mirror

As we’ve seen, our political discourse is full of absolutist rhetoric. Equivocation, compromise, humility—these things don’t win elections. And it can be so tempting to respond to the heat and anxiety of the moment with passionate jeremiads of our own. Denouncing what is wrong with society or government or the other political “side”, either challenging what we consider to be the narrow-mindedness or moral failings of our hearers, or firing up the like-minded by railing against the evil of a shared enemy.

But I wonder if Barth was onto something: maybe we should not just mirror the rhetoric already in evidence. Maybe we should not just offer another editorial with some God talk mixed in. After all, every day new opinion pieces appear lamenting all that is wrong with one political perspective or the other. Every day new blog posts, articles, and tweets appear arguing for or against policies, reacting to the latest political outrage, issuing dire warnings and assigning blame. All of that is being done already, and at least some of it by people who know a lot more than I do.

What would it mean—since all of that is already covered— what would it mean not to be a mirror, reflecting back the same, but to be a window? To bear witness to the God who is God as those who are not God, and thus without “sacred rhetoric”? What would it mean to deprive our inner partisans of their pathos, acknowledging the relative and provisional nature of all our human assessments and convictions, and thus create a space to model in our preaching a more generous kind of theological reflection on politics?

It may involve a very difficult surrender in our current political environment: laying down our weapons. Giving up the idea that my goal as a preacher is to change people’s political minds, to influence how they vote, to convince those made stupid that my political vision is the true and faithful one, or at least to make sure the ones who do get it vote. It means when I am led to address social and political issues in my sermons I give up the idea that I am speaking *for* God, but instead pointing to the God who has, does, and will speak the Word of grace, Jesus Christ.

Grace has implications for our struggles here and now, personal and political, systemic and individual, of course. But when a wise preacher thinks after grace in relation to social and political issues, she doesn’t confuse her thinking after with grace itself. She leaves room for the possibility that there are things she hasn’t thought of, she leaves room for the possibility that grace could find another way.

Let the Bible breathe

One way to preach during an election season might be to preach topical sermons specifically designed to address the issues you deem most important between the sermon and the next election cycle.

Churchgoers tell researchers that prior to last year's election they heard preachers weigh in on immigration, "religious freedom," abortion, homosexuality, and environmental issues in their sermons.

But I think Barth was right to be wary about approaching the task of preaching "topically" at such a time as this, that is, approaching the task of preaching with an agenda all figured out, hunting through the Bible for a text which will second the motion you already have in hand. This may be particularly tempting for those who do not preach from the lectionary, and thus have the task of selecting a text week after week—who can blame such preachers for searching for something that seems to be relevant for the moment?

But it is especially at times of political turmoil and widespread anxiety that the Bible can provide that horizon that puts parochial frustrations and fears into perspective. It is a reminder that our local stories have a place in a much bigger narrative, a narrative of cosmic proportions. Though nothingness and chaos perpetually threaten to absorb the world, the triune God holds open a space and a time for creaturely life, bringing the story of the world with all its twists and turns and rough edges to a good end. The story is that big.

So rather than hunting for a text that lets you say what you already wanted to say, or domesticating the lectionary text by making it say what you already wanted to say, let it be its strange self. Let the strangeness of its imagery, language, plot, serve to disrupt your usual way with words, the newspeak which dominates our discourse. It is good for us to ask ourselves from time to time just how much of our pulpit rhetoric is infused with partisan code words. Shaped decisively by the language games that we learned from the media we consume. Rather than translating what we meet in the Bible into those familiar categories, let it remain somewhat undomesticated, even reveling in the places where there is an awkward fit between then and there and here and now. Most preachers know that the awkward places are often the most fruitful by the end of sermon purgatory. This in no way means you are not listening to the claim of the text in relation to the particular political situation all around. But it does mean you are listening, not just proof-texting.

Prophesy without contempt

And in fact there may be times when, after deep wrestling with the claims of a biblical text and some aspect of the contemporary context, you are called to speak "prophetically," unmasking an idol, naming an injustice or wrong, clearing away some cobwebs.

But when it is time to speak as a prophet, remember that prophets speak from and with the people they speak to. Prophets are for their people—that's why they are against them. It is a loyal opposition. It does not work at all if I don't know and love the people I am addressing. I was struck by the powerful title of Cathleen Kaveny's new book *Prophesy Without Contempt*. Kaveny observes that the best jeremiads, the ones that did what they were supposed to do, were

delivered with generosity, even toward opponents. Lincoln's vision, Martin Luther King's dream—these are examples of what she means.

Such prophesy imagines a future with a place for all, a place incomplete without the adversarial other. Prophets name what has gone wrong, yes, but also what the grace of new beginning might look like. When the time comes to speak as a prophet, you will know, but when you do, be the loyal opposition, full of hope, and always without contempt. "Whoever despises another human being will never be able to make anything of him," Bonhoeffer wrote from prison. "The only fruitful relation to human beings... is love."

Expand the cast

Love compels us to consider the thing that troubles many of us the most about the rhetoric of this political season, in particular that of Donald Trump: the dehumanizing things he has said and continues to say about groups and individuals, the slurs and slanders and innuendos and insults. Is it far-fetched to say that such language games leave traces in us? Even if we intentionally reject them?

There is some empirical evidence that this is precisely the case. Words shape our perceptions. Now a preacher could just say that such hate speech is wrong and that is that. But resistance to the residue of such rhetoric requires something more, something deeper than just condemning the rhetoric itself. It requires a homiletical reversal. A counter melody. And that is something Bonhoeffer can help us with, I think, when he reminds us that people can learn to sympathize second-hand.

If you are kidnapped, do you know what experts say you should do? As soon as you can, tell your captor your name, tell about your 4 year-old daughter, tell about how you used to go fishing with your Dad, tell about how your cat begs for Fancy Feast. Why do experts advise you to disclose as much as possible about the details of your life to your abductor? It's a lot harder to hurt someone, a lot harder to ignore someone's pain, when their humanity is on full display. How does a preacher counter the rhetoric of demonization, a rhetoric that so relies on distance and generalities and stereotypes? By showing the richly-textured humanity of those so demonized. How might a preacher do this?

It is long-standing homiletical wisdom that sermons should show us what difference the gospel might make to someone here and now. Every good preacher knows you need to show and not just tell. So every sermon will have a cast, one way or another. Jesus will be there regularly, of course, along with the many characters who run to meet us in the pages of Scripture, but good preachers know there should be others there in the sermon too, people closer to home. Sometimes giants appear: your Mother Teresas, your Martin Luther Kings, but (if you are wise) also people a lot like the people who are sitting there listening week after week.

But if we are to disrupt the disturbing rhetoric that demeans and demonizes and diminishes certain groups of people, then the cast of characters that populate many of our sermons will need to expand. There may be some new featured players. There will be one of the young mothers from Mexico, who used to bring me small homemade gifts when I taught in an inner city school in Santa Ana, California. There will be someone like the woman in her sixties who asked for

prayers in church in Pittsburgh the other day, supporting her disabled brother, who just found out she will be downsized because the company she works for is moving her department overseas. We will spend some time following Ameen Ashraf, a Muslim man who serves meals to the homeless in the Bay Area out of his roving bright yellow food truck known as “Mercy on Wheels.” And so many others.

Some of the people you describe can be real people you encounter or read about, some might be people you invite hearers to imagine with you. It’s not that you are preaching sermons *about* these cast members, but you are allowing the wide story of God’s way with human beings to intersect the richly-textured humanity of those under attack. This constitutes a more powerful and reparative response to dehumanizing rhetoric than simply denouncing the rhetoric itself.

Cultivate a deliberative community

Finally, what preachers say in those twenty or so minutes between the singing and the prayers is important, yes. But most of us know that deep consideration of the theological dimensions of the many complex social and political issues of any given time and place is impossible in twenty minutes a week, especially when they are issues about which Christians disagree. For many of us, recent events have brought the sad realization that it is unlikely that mainline protestants, Catholics, evangelicals can come together and speak with one voice about hate speech, even though the majority, left and right, express dismay about it to pollsters. Just a simple declaration: God loves all people. Because we believe that, we do not practice or condone the rhetoric of hate. Not toward immigrants, not toward Muslims, not towards presidential candidates, and not towards those we disagree with. Period. We couldn’t make such a statement because some would see it as partisan. We couldn’t do it, because there is not enough trust, not enough shared identity, even for that. And by the way, I’m not blaming conservatives for feeling that way. Only a Christian community accustomed to regular generous theo-political deliberation across differences could create the degree of trust required for a joint statement about the rhetoric of this election season or support for things that should be resoundingly trans-partisan like Black Lives Matter.

But deliberation takes skills, and those skills take practice. We couldn’t speak as one voice in relation to hate speech because I’m willing to venture that we (liberals and conservatives and everything in between) have not been practicing. We are unprepared to talk to each other about the intersection of faith and politics in many of our churches, just as my extended family is unprepared to talk to each other about such things, in spite of all the things in common. Why is that?

James K. A. Smith describes places like shopping malls and sports arenas as religious sites, noting their liturgies, their rituals, the way they form our moral instincts and shape our desires.⁷ And we might add our habitus as consumers of political culture to his list, regardless of whether we participate in political liturgies via television, podcast, radio station, print media, or smart phone. If we were to take the “practices inventory” that Smith recommends, how much of our

⁷James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 88.

time, attention, energy is spent each week as consumers of, or participants in, partisan liturgies?⁸ How much of the time are we speaking the language of left or right, learning to see the world through the categories that meet us repeatedly, showing us some things but hiding others from view? Is it crazy to suggest that this may result in a degree of malformation when it comes to a) our own “stupidity” and b) our ability to be sympathetic, even towards other people who also have been made stupid by their political grazing habits, to some degree at least?

The omnipresence of sacred rhetoric about politics is not the only factor that makes it difficult for American Christians to talk about public issues. Political scientist Diana Mutz explains that in relation to the citizens of other countries, Americans have fewer face-to-face conversations with people whose political views differ from their own.⁹ This is not to say Americans don’t talk about politics, but the empirical evidence strongly suggests we talk about politics with people who in large part share the views we already hold, where deliberative skills are relatively unnecessary. Mutz think churches have great potential as places where cross-cutting talk could occur. So why don’t such conversations happen in many of our churches?

Because Americans avoid political talk in contexts where they value community and harmony above all else, places like churches. Christians either select a politically homogenous church that at least in part mirrors their views, or choose a congregation that may include diverse views about which no one speaks, for fear of disturbing the appearance of harmony. So not only are American Christians ill-suited for deliberation due to the malformation that comes with constant exposure to absolutist rhetoric about politics, they also are unlikely to have much experience of the kind of conversation in which critical and generous deliberative skills might be honed—they either choose to worship with like-minded others, or they don’t talk about politics at church because the risk of conflict is too high. Given all these reasons theo-political deliberation doesn’t happen, how could we change that? Well, I think we just have to start doing it. Even if it means starting small, finding a few people in our congregations who have different political perspectives, but who trust each other enough to sit down regularly with the Bible and a newsfeed and exchange reasons, stories, fears, and hopes.

CONCLUSION

Courageous witness in the context of the sacred rhetoric of populism and patriotism and fear is rooted in the wide horizon of Barth and the sympathy of Bonhoeffer. The key of grace means the modesty that comes with knowing your political convictions are provisional and relative, because only God is God. The key of grace means affirming that every person is a beloved of God—the ones demeaned and mocked and threatened, and even the ones who have been made stupid. To speak in the key of grace means that even when a prophetic word is necessary, it is always without contempt. It’s easy to forget that the protection of hate speech under the First Amendment is one of the things that *is* truly exceptional about the United States. The ACLU position regarding Nazi groups in the US is that the best response to bad speech is more speech. Yes. Good. But what language can we borrow to deprive absolutists of their pathos? To be a window and not another mirror? It’s not just that we want people to stop using the rhetoric that

⁸You can find Smith’s “practices audit” in *Desiring the Kingdom*, 84.

⁹Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51.

demonizes and demeans or approving of those who do. We want to address the feelings and motivations that lead people to use these words about other people. And for that, there have to be places where people can trust each other enough to talk about those feelings and motivations. And the Christian church should be one of those places.

A genuinely counter-cultural rhetoric does not consist in taking up absolutist speech in our pulpits to defeat absolutism but precisely in depriving it of its pathos. A genuinely counter-cultural rhetoric can only take root if we practice, passionately, patiently, cheerfully; on folding chairs in church basements, the Bible in one hand and the newsfeed in the other, saying our prayers and trusting one another enough to talk about the two most dangerous things in the world: religion and politics.

Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism

Amanda Drury

Amanda Drury, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana, delivered this opening lecture of The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, April 25, 2017.

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hen we encounter a teenager who really seems to “get it,” we need to follow up to see just what exactly they “got.”

It is becoming increasingly difficult to claim a faith tradition without including caveats. “I’m a Christian, but not the kind who...” “I’m a Christian but I believe that...” “I’m a Protestant who thinks...” We make more apologies than declarations. In this particular political climate, our statements of faith appear with ready-made disclaimers. We have modifiers, adjectives, statements of clarification, because the only thing worse than being a Christian is being *that* kind of Christian. Of course, this assumes we say anything at all. Sometimes it’s just easier to duck. What we proclaim, if we proclaim anything at all, is not anything prophetic as much as it is...nice.

We’ve been trying of late to add some passion to the niceness. However, in an effort to get our teenagers to feel something remotely religious we forget there can be unintended consequences of passionate faith. And so when we encounter a teenager who really seems to “get it,” we need to follow up to see what they “got.”

It has been twelve years since we first heard that phrase “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”—the National Study of Youth and Religion led by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton revealing that the de facto religion of North American teenagers seems to be one where God is a divine butler or a cosmic therapist. You ask the average church-attending teenager what they believe and they shrug. God is a God of “benign whateverism;” Smith and Denton say¹. Christianity, is a religion of the nice. We’ve been hearing all about this for the past decade.

Smith and Denton’s studies suggest that these teenagers are an accurate reflection of their parents. What you see in the parent is reflected in the child. Kenda Dean followed up this research with the alarming observation that it’s not that teenagers aren’t paying attention in church. It’s that they *are* paying attention. They are picking up what we are putting down. These teenagers are holding up a mirror, allowing us to see the ramifications of our formational words.

Somewhere along the way the good news started seeming less good and more—*nice*. And this nice news wasn’t really even *news*; it was stale. The Good News morphed into a very nice history lesson where we were transformed not so much into the image of Christ as we were into the color of beige.

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 266. I am increasingly grateful for my research assistant, John Wilson, for his contributions to this piece.

That was twelve years ago. We've had twelve years to get our sea legs in this newly described Moralistic Therapeutic Deist territory, twelve years asking: "how do we convince teenagers that this matters? That this is worth dying for? That God is not a distant, removed being but is present. Here. That faith and sacrifice often go together." We've spent twelve years trying to bring back the passion.

Now full disclosure: I have spent the last ten of those twelve years feeling pretty smug. MTD was a description of *other* people. Of *other* churches. *Other* faith traditions.

I come from a tradition that is highly articulate and highly devoted. You ask us what we believe and not only can we tell you, we can also tell you how you can believe it for yourself. We talk about Jesus like he's our best friend. We speak of God as if we just spent an hour at Starbucks with him (and there's a good chance we actually did). And I love that about my tradition. I really do.

I knew about an immanent God. I understood my faith went beyond being nice. I was told God was present, always watching and that God loved the world, pined for it, really. I was told that true peace came through Christ Jesus, that happiness meant holiness, and that my faith was worth dying for.

There was only one problem: I believed it.

In our post MTD world, we have *been struggling with the question*, "What if our teenagers don't take this whole faith thing seriously?" However, perhaps an equally weighty question is, "What if they do?"

I believed Jesus was a present and personal God who wanted to be involved in my everyday life. I also believed I was continually on the cusp of hurting God's feelings.

I believed my faith involved suffering and sacrifice and that Jesus called for less of me and more of him. I also believed that if I was not involved in some kind of spiritual battle, I was doing something wrong. Comfortability equaled complacency and complacency equaled backsliding. If you're not moving forward, you are obviously moving backward.

I believed Jesus was the answer for the world in the same way I believed an EpiPen® was needed for a peanut allergy. And so my task in life was to run to every person I met and ask, "Are you allergic to peanuts? Do you have an EpiPen®? I have one right here." Because what kind of monster isn't offering an EpiPen® to a world dying of peanut exposure?

I was not caught up in the life of God; rather, Jesus was in my pocket ready to be used. My faith was less, "I have come that they might have life," and more along the lines of God as Princess Leia, "Help me, Mandy, you're my only hope!"

Somewhere along the way the good news stopped seeming so good. It was news, all right. There was a message to be shared that was quite different from the message of the world. But the news wasn't necessarily good. And when the Good News isn't good, it's just news...alternative news.

My fear is that in running from moralistic therapeutic deism, we run the risk of overcorrecting in a Pac-Man like fashion; coming out on the other side. My fear is that in stoking flames of passion within an MTD context we are unintentionally creating a culture of Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism.

While there are teenagers operating under the MTD pretext that God is here to make them happy, there are also those teenagers who are equally convinced they are here to make God happy. Both strands have distorted images of God. And it’s within this context, many of us have found ourselves shifting from a religion of “benign whateverism” to a kind of “malignant fervor.”

Here’s a look at both MTD and MTP in a side by side comparison:

Question	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism	Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism
Metaphysical beginning	1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.	1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and planned out every day of my life before I was even born.
Moral means	2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.	2. God wants people to be holy and obedient, to pray and read their bibles, and to share their faith.
Moral ends	3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.	3. The central goal of life is to make God happy
Metaphysical middle	4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.	4. God wants to be involved in every single aspect of one's life, and if he's not, his feelings are hurt.
Metaphysical/moral end	5. Good people go to heaven when they die.	5. Saved people go to heaven when they die.

For MTD, “Immanuel” means “God with us...when we’re in trouble.” And for MTP “Immanuel” means “God with us...and can’t live without us.” If MTD is, “I will go to God when I am anxious,” MTP is, “I am anxious because of God.” The therapeutic element is certainly there. If I can make God feel happy, then I will feel happy. My happiness is contingent on God’s happiness, and God’s happiness is contingent on my actions. In MTD God is emotionally distant. In MTP God is emotionally needy. If MTD is a bastardization of the Gospel, than MTP is its incestuous counterpart.

The 2014 movie, “Stations of the Cross” follows 12-year-old Maria who is a part of a Vatican 2-rejecting, conservative Catholic sect and is preparing for her upcoming confirmation. The film is

broken into fourteen fixed, wide-angled shots, each representing one of the stations of the cross.² The cinematography alone is worth watching as each scene unfolds within a single, stationary and continuous shot.

The movie opens at the first station of the cross, “Jesus is condemned to death.” Maria and her peers are receiving instructions from their priest concerning their upcoming confirmation. The priest describes the world as being at war with the Gospel and invites the young teenagers to enlist as warriors, making sacrifices to advance the Kingdom of God. By this logic a sacrifice (i.e. not listening to music on the radio) creates more space in my life for the Holy Spirit to reside. “Each time we say ‘no’ we make room for Jesus in our hearts,” he reasons. The ultimate call, of course, is to give one’s entire life as sacrifice, thereby being fully dedicated to God. Maria, taking all of this in, asks whether or not one could make a sacrifice for the sake of another. We soon learn that Maria has her 4-year-old brother in mind who has a form of autism and has yet to utter a single word.

The second scene opens with the title, “Jesus Carries his Cross” and shows Maria on a walk with her family through the German countryside. After remarking on the beauty of the scenery, Maria asks Bernadette, her au pair, “Do you think it could be sacrificed?” Bernadette hesitantly supposes it could.

So, Maria continues the walk, keeping her gaze straight ahead and directed towards the ground. She has, in her mind, sacrificed a view, thereby creating more space inside of her for God. She takes it a step further and removes both her coat and her cardigan and continues her walk in the frigid spring air in a thin, short-sleeved blouse, sacrificing her warmth. Her reasoning: Less of me and my desires, more of God.

This backfires, however as Maria’s stern and domineering mother approaches and scolds her daughter for her impractical clothing. Her mother mistakes the sacrifice for an attention-seeking move and accuses her daughter of being vain in her desire to show off her beautiful blouse. You see Maria’s mental anguish as her attempts at piety are misinterpreted as pride.

The sacrifices continue. She gives up singing in a choir. She begins to spurn the young man with whom she enjoyed friendship. Her meal portions shrink and shrink until it is clear her own life is at risk. But Maria’s joy is set before her. Her understanding of being wholly God’s dictates how she operates within the world.

The day of Maria’s confirmation arrives, and she approaches the altar shaking. She is already anxious about having all eyes on her, potentially admiring her confirmation dress. What if she falls into pride? As she kneels before the priest to receive a blessing she swoons, falls to the floor, and ultimately ends up hospitalized.

The doctors are clearly concerned. Not only is Maria not eating, but she clearly no longer desires to live. In fact, conversations about death meant to bring her to her senses only entrench her

² *Stations of the Cross*, directed by Dietrich Bruggemann (Germany: Film Movement, 2015).

further in her desire to be a living sacrifice. Her nearness to death is her sign that she is closer to God. The nurse's wise pleas for health are received as foolishness.

In one of the final scenes, "Jesus dies on the cross," Maria is on her deathbed and requests that the priest visit and offer final unction. The priest arrives with communion and she opens her mouth to receive the sacrament. However, as she attempts to swallow the wafer, after having not eaten anything for quite some time, Maria begins to cough and choke to the point that she flat lines. The room fills with doctors, an attending nurse reaches into her mouth to dislodge the host, but despite their efforts, they are unable to resuscitate Maria. In an ironic and troubling twist, the moment Maria is declared dead, her autistic brother opens his mouth and utters his first words, leaving the viewers wondering just where and how God was present.

For Maria, the Bible was indeed a double-edged sword—one she was called to thrust herself upon. Maria was the good girl. The kid we all want in our youth group. She stays after church to ask questions. She desires to integrate her understanding of faith into her form of life. She seeks to honor her parents. When we encounter a teenager who seems to really "get it," we need to follow up to see what they got.

My earlier research focused on teenagers who "got it;" teenagers who were articulate on faith matters. I was (and still am) fully committed to this articulation theory that adolescents engage in their most authentic selves when they are able to articulate just who exactly they are (as opposed to merely assenting to whom we proclaim them to be). Thinking of Maria, it seemed wise to revisit some of these youth groups to attempt to explore the object of their articulated faith. To see just what it was they "got."

Now, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton administered 3290 Surveys and 167 in-depth phone interviews with the help of over 20 associates, over the course of two years. I interviewed sixteen teenagers with the help of three associates over the course of six months. So, you can see, we pretty much did the same thing.³

Obviously not. Let me be clear: I am not attempting to make any grand sociological claims; rather, I am attempting to listen to the theology that is expressed in articulate teenagers; to listen as they describe their faith and to search out theological implications that undergird such talk.

The sixteen teenagers we interviewed were highly devoted teenagers. The kind of kids you want in your youth group. When we asked them to describe God, the word most commonly used was "friend." God is like a friend. Following the survey, we sat down in individual face-to-face interviews and asked them to tell us more about this friendship. And this is where things got a bit sticky.

This idea of God as friend sounds great! It wonderfully captures the love and affection I want for my teenagers to have in their understanding of God.

³ I am indebted to Pastors Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis who invested many hours in overseeing and transcribing these interviews as well as their engagement in the many conversations that led to the above conclusions. This research was made possible by the Adolescent Faith and Flourishing initiative housed in the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

But there's a problem. What if this friend is constantly tagging along, budding into your conversations? What if this friend was constantly asking to be introduced to your other friends? What if this friend wants you to repost every single one of their online statuses? What if this friend is counting the minutes between texts to see how long it takes you to respond to gauge your loyalty? Jesus is a friend who's really, super sensitive.

Many of the teenagers told stories about being ignored by a friend, or neglecting to include someone and how sad they felt. In an act of anthropomorphism, their feelings from these experiences were then transferred to God. In other words, God was not defining friendship; rather, the teenagers' understanding of friendship was defining God.

Nathan explained it this way:

So, if you're in relationship with any human...it might hurt if they don't talk about you when something comes up...If I say to all my friends on the track team, "I love that Micah runs on the team" and then Wyatt is standing right there...like me and Wyatt have a friendship and God and I have a friendship and so it hurts him because he could be disappointed in me.⁴

Vanessa explains:

I feel like I'd be sad if someone didn't mention my name if something had to do with me...so God in the same way...if something great happened that he had a part in and I was telling someone else...I think he'd be sad if we didn't mention Him.⁵

You could sense the internal conflict as these teenagers attempted to rectify this easily disappointed friend with an all-loving God.

Annie sums this up nicely: "I mean, I think he's a little upset...like he's not upset, but...semi-disappointed but not super-disappointed...he's not happy but sorta disappointed that you missed that opportunity but at the same time he presents other opportunities so he's very forgiving about it."⁶ You can see the cognitive dissonance here.

While the concept of "friend" is generally thought to be a pleasant one, we would be remiss not to consider the role and function of *teenage* friendships. The recently coined word "frienemy" describes the adolescent friendship culture well. Consider the adolescent propensity towards jealousy should their friend Jesus spend more time with another person. Vanessa confesses:

⁴ Nathan, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁵ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁶ Annie, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

“When somebody else says that they heard from God I feel kinda like, *Ah man, why didn't I hear from God too? Why didn't God speak to me?* He spoke to this person.”⁷

Vanessa acknowledges this kind of jealousy is not something she is necessarily proud of:

I know that it's not really a good way to think about it but when you're comparing your spiritual lives, I'm like *I go to church more than them, or I'm in the word more than they are, or I try so much harder than they do, and I still haven't heard from God. So why have they been called by God or spoken to by him, and I haven't?*⁸

If the Jesus of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a divine butler or the cosmic therapist Smith and Denton speak of, than the Jesus of Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism is that awkward friend slightly off to the side, watching my every move. Imagine a relationship where you are continually afraid of hurting one's feelings; a relationship where the other person is continually slipping in tests and opportunities to prove your love and loyalty. If I am in a relationship with another who is a) perfect and b) easily disappointed, either I am not going to last long, or I am going to be a miserable individual with a warped understanding of the Good News.

Sometimes, in our efforts to convince teenagers that God matters and is present and personal, we overcompensate and create God in our own image to the point that my understanding of the word “friend” over determines my understanding of God.

My fear is that in describing Christianity in our impassioned terms, we convince our young people that our faith is worth dying for but forget to show them how to live.

Just last week, an article commemorating the religious impact of Columbine emerged. Writer Alissa Wilkinson speaks of “the ‘awesomeness of martyrdom’ having been “converted into a kind of fantasy of oppression, wherein persecution is something to be wished for, not something to escape.”⁹ Alan Noble writing for *The Atlantic* in 2014 referred to the “evangelical persecution complex” and warned us of problematic Christian narratives of suffering that “fetishize suffering.”¹⁰ Noble explains how persecution can often be a sign to Evangelical Christians that they are doing something right. “The danger of this view,” he writes, “is that believers can come to see victimhood as an essential part of their identity.”

⁷ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁸ Vanessa, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, College Wesleyan Church, November 2015.

⁹ Alissa Wilkinson, “After Columbine, Martyrdom Became a Popular Fantasy for Christian Teenagers,” *Vox*, April 2017, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/20/15369442/columbine-anniversary-cassie-bernall-rachel-scott-martyrdom>.

¹⁰ Alan Noble, “The Evangelical Persecution Complex: The Theological and Cultural Roots of a Damaging Attitude in the Christian Community,” *The Atlantic*, August 2014, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>.

Now, I don't want to get rid of the passion part. I hold onto that mindset that faith is worth risking your whole life for. And so, important questions emerge: How do I describe a God who is personal but not petty? How do I speak of a God who is passionate and also immutable?

Without letting go of this idea of a God who suffers with us, I think we need to reclaim the doctrine of immutability within the youth world—this idea that God is unchanging and that I cannot hurt God's feelings. Without immutability we are stuck with a God who loves us on Monday and is annoyed with us on Tuesday.

This is difficult for anyone to grasp—and teenagers in particular. Maria is missing the nuance of her priest's words. When I speak of the Good News, when I make feeble attempts to speak of an unspeakable God, I must find a way to speak with mystery and beauty without relying on a teenager's brain to be able to nuance my words. God is passionate. And God is unchanging.

This nuancing can be tricky for teenagers. Teenagers are not known for their subtlety. This was made perfectly clear to me in my first youth ministry position while I was a seminary student. On a Sunday morning in front of a full youth room, a 7th grade girl announced, "No offense, Amanda..." (you already know this is not going in a good direction). "No offence, Amanda, but I wouldn't be caught dead in that sweater you're wearing." I was speechless. However, my husband jumped in and said something along the lines of, "Well, I know you're not really a pink person, so maybe it's the pink?" He asked the young woman who was clad in black. "No," she said thoughtfully, "it's not just the pink. It's actually most of her wardrobe." And there you have it: subtlety at its finest.

We see evidence of this struggle with subtlety and nuance in various neurological studies. A few years back, Neuropsychologist Deborah Yurgelun-Todd of Harvard University's McClean Hospital led a study mapping the differences between adolescent and adult brains. Using MRI technology, both adult and adolescent volunteers were shown a series of pictures of people's faces and asked to identify the emotion they saw in the facial expression. The team of neuropsychologists would observe brain patterns in connection with the emotions identified.¹¹ Here is an example of one of the photos shown.¹²



It was not a large study; nevertheless, Yurgelun-Todd was surprised by the discrepancies between adolescent and adult brains. Every single one of the adults in the study was able to correctly identify the emotion of fear in this photo. "The woman is afraid" was the response

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Inside the Teenage Brain: Interview with Deborah Yurgelun-Todd," PBS: Frontline, 2002, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/todd.html>.

given. The teenagers, however, were not able to come to the same conclusion. While there were a few teenagers who identified the emotion of fear, the other responses given were anger, sadness, surprise. What seemed clear to the adults in the study was not nearly as clear to the teenagers.

Furthermore, adolescent participants in the study used different parts of their brains to reach their conclusions. Adults relied upon their pre-frontal cortices—that area which we say carries out executive functions—the critical thinking part of our brains. Adolescents were operating out of their amygdala—that part of the brain associated with emotions—when exposed to the fearful faces.¹³

To put it bluntly, what seemed perfectly clear to the adults was less clear to the adolescents involved in the study. That which we could easily identify with our prefrontal cortices was interpreted by a more visceral reaction for our teenagers. Simply put, when I think I am expressing fear or concern, they might hear disappointment or anger. So how do we speak of the mystery of the gospel, the hope from sin, the grace of penance, while still serving as responsible curators of the adolescent brain?

I say, “friend,” and they hear, “frienemy.”

I say “sacrifice,” and Maria hears “stop eating.”

The more impassioned my language, the more careful I must be with my words, tone, and facial expressions. I want Maria to know of the passionate fidelity God has towards her. I also want her to know that God has that same passionate fidelity for her younger Autistic brother, and that the goodness of God is not a zero-sum game. She does not give up her life so that her brother might have more life. There is enough life to go around because that is who God is. Moreover, God has that same passionate fidelity toward God’s self. God is unchanging.

I want Maria to nuance her understanding of sacrifice according to the story of her namesake, Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary’s “may it be done to me according to as you have said” is not a story about Mary ceasing to be; rather, she expresses an openness for the fullness of God to dwell within the fullness of her own person.

This is what I want for my own children. I want my children to grasp the passion of Christ. I want them to know that there is a passionate fidelity that God extends to God’s children. God is faithful to you. God is faithful to me. And I also want them to know that God is faithful to God’s self. God is immutable. God is unchanging.

Immutability is not a youth group friendly word: after all, is there anything more mutable than a teenager? What does it mean to speak of an unchangeable God to mutating teenagers? Unchanging. Unchangeable. I wonder if in our efforts to convince teenagers that God is with us and God is for us, we forget that God is not contingent on us. And this God is unchanging. God is passionately faithful to me, and God is passionately faithful to God’s self.

¹³ Ibid.

Immutability is a tricky term. It's one that immediately sends me to my rolodex of Bible stories, searching out the stories where God has changed, tempered, adjusted. At first glance the immutability of God appears to threaten the passion of God. I want a God that is moved by me and who grows in compassion. I would like to think that perhaps the words I pray could somehow prompt change.

My 9-year-old is prone to ear infections. He recently had a particularly painful episode that left doctors scratching their heads on how to help him. As I was tucking him in that night Sam said, "I know God has compassion for me when he sees I have an earache. But do you think it's possible that God could know what it's like to *actually feel* just how painful it is? Do you think he could feel it so that he has even *more* compassion for me?"

Sam doesn't just want a God who is compassionate; he wants a God who grows in compassion because of what Sam is experiencing. Sam wants God to change.

Sam wants a mutable God. I want Sam to know a mutable God. I want Sam to know of the God who suffers with him. I want Sam to know a mutable God. I also want Sam to know an immutable God. I want Sam to know that the passion of God is not contingent on Sam's actions. I want Sam to know that he cannot hurt God's feelings, that God is God regardless of what Sam does, and that God is glorified whether Sam glorifies him or not.

My initial reaction to the doctrine of immutability is one of discomfort. But just as our teens read their understanding of friendship into how they see God, so too am I tempted to read my understanding of immutability into how I see God, to let immutability define God rather than the other way around.

And so just as God informs us on what true friendship means, so God informs us on what immutable means. Immutability is not defined in a dictionary, it is defined by God. And God, we see, is passionately immutable.

Characteristics of God do not exist in a vacuum. They cannot be lined up in neat columns. Attempting to give us something tangible to grasp, we systematize what we believe about God, oftentimes ordering it neatly to fit a fifteen-week syllabus. But, as Kate Sonderegger writes, "The attributes of God, though unique, are also indivisible."¹⁴ You cannot have one without the other. And so, God is passionate. And God is immutable. And God is passionately immutable. God is immutably passionate.

And so we recall the story of the lost son and we remember the father who waits, who watches, and when he sees his son, is moved with compassion and runs. A passionate God runs. An immutably passionate God *always* runs. Do you hear the good news in immutability?

Words matter. Let's keep saying that God is a friend--but unlike any other friend we have ever known. God is a parent—but unlike any parent we have ever known. God is unchanging—but unlike anything unchanging we have ever seen before. Let us also occasionally remove the

¹⁴ Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 299.

familial terms we use for God and speak of God as light or God as rock, because you can't hurt a rock's feelings.

A passionate God runs. An immutably passionate God *always* runs.

A passionate shepherd looks for the sheep. An immutably passionate shepherd *always* looks for the sheep.

We cannot hurt God's feelings. We cannot put God in a good mood. God's happiness is self-contained in God's self. And it is within this self-contained happiness that God chooses to be happy with and for us.

Not long ago my husband John and I were sharing about our days before we went to bed. I made the comment with some consternation, "I'm not sure I was even remotely aware of the presence of God this entire day."

"And yet," John responded, "God was present with you all day long anyway."

In that conversation two paths clearly emerged. One path led to a moody God conjuring within me shame and anxiety. The other was a passionately immutable God who, by his very nature, is with me regardless of whether or not I acknowledge him. One path is an impetus for fear, the other, an invitation to worship. That's good news.

The Foolish Call to Love

(1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this farewell to the graduates at the 205th Commencement Ceremony of Princeton Theological Seminary, held in the Princeton University Chapel on Saturday, May 20, 2017.

The Apostle Paul has some piercing counsel for the graduates of this year's class: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters ..."

I have discovered that one of the easiest ways to start an in-depth conversation with seminarians is to bring up the subject of calling. Some of you came here because you felt a calling from God. Others of you came here in order to search for that calling. And still others may remain confused by exactly what it means to be called by God, although I encourage you to work that out before you begin to interview for a job.

Even those outside of the professional ministry are very interested in finding a calling. The late Vaclav Havel, served many years of imprisonment in hard labor for resistance to his totalitarian government before he became the celebrated first president of the free Czech Republic. During this imprisonment he smuggled out some of his deep reflections on life under the guise of letters to his wife. These reflections were later published in a book titled *Letters to Olga*. In one of the letters he claims he can withstand any adversity if he just knows his responsibility because the secret of human beings is the secret of their responsibility.

This is the secret we most want the still small voice of the Holy Spirit to whisper in our ears. We want a holy response to the persistent questions "What is my responsibility?" "What is my calling?"

When someone makes an appointment with me to talk about calling, I know it probably won't be long before we are talking about job descriptions. But that is not really the concern of the Apostle Paul whose job description was to make tents.

The call, the secret of your life to use Havel's terms, the source of your life to use the Apostle Paul's terms, is to know the wisdom of God.

In the wisdom of God, you were made righteous, Paul claims, redeemed and sanctified by Christ Jesus crucified. So you were redeemed and made righteous by a Savior who was literally dying to love you. And to experience sanctification means that as you find your life in Christ you will be dying to love others. This is God's idea of wisdom.

These had to be strange words to the Greeks in Corinth who, like you, admired wisdom and spent years of hard work trying to obtain it. There was not much in their tradition that claimed it was wise to find yourself on a cross. There was even less in the Roman tradition that used the cross as one of their favorite means of execution. And in the places where you will be called to

serve, all of the so-called wisdom you will receive will be devoted to strategies for avoiding the cross.

In the days ahead you're going to get so much advice. It will come from the chair of the search committee that hired you. If you become a pastor, it will come from the angry member who's been in the church too long. (Just to remind you, congregations don't have graduations.) The advice will come from books, blogs, podcasts. It will come from your spouse, friends, covenant group, or your guild. When you get home after an exhausting day, and remember to call your mother, she will tell you that you're working too hard. These people care about you and want you to succeed, so they are offering you their wisdom. But few of them will bring up the foolishness of taking up your own cross as a means of following a call to be dying to love.

Even our brains are not wired to think loving is wise or rational. In a recent *New York Times* article, the psychiatrist Anna Fels tried to make sense of the suicide bombers who killed 44 worshipers in Egyptian churches last Palm Sunday.¹ Her claim is that several of the brain's regions have areas that are known to generate aggression. So our hate, cunning, revenge can appear very rational. We can convince ourselves, even to the point of self-destruction, that it is wise to hurt those who threaten our beliefs. But this isn't limited to crazed suicide bombers.

It is also why our society thinks it is wise to blame the mythical "them" for our problems. We keep hearing, "They are not like us." "They want to take something away from you." "They don't belong here, and must be excluded." And then the hurting begins. Hate rationally takes its time, makes plans, seeks revenge, devises schemes.

By contrast, Dr. Fels claims, love deactivates the areas of the brain that generate reasoning. This is why we say things like, "I fell in love." It is as if to say "I was walking along, on a rational course for my life, but I tripped, I fell, in love."

When I speak to couples in premarital counseling, I eventually ask each of them, "Why do you love this person?" This is when they hold hands and look at each other. The face of the person answering the question says, "Okay, I know this is really important." And then the stammering starts. But they cannot come up with anything that rationally explains why they are in love. Eventually they say something like, "I don't know ... I just have to spend my life with this person." It is fascinating that they can tell me exactly why they chose their professions, and why they prefer a Honda to a Chevy, or Cheerios to Wheaties. But the rationality isn't coming when they try to explain why they are about to make a holy covenant with this person.

I am a strong believer in rationality and have devoted much of life to pursuing it. I'm so devoted that I know rationality's limitations.

"Consider your own call," the Apostle Paul tells us. "It wasn't because you were so wise that God called you. God has chosen the foolish to confound the wise." These lines don't make it into a lot of commencement addresses. But it isn't meant to be a slam on the day of your graduation.

¹ Anna Fels, "The Point of Hate," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2017.

And it has nothing to do with how smart you are. It is meant to reveal your calling. This is a call to the wisdom confounding activity of dying to love, which beckons you to surrender your life to the community God has given you to serve. After all you have worked so hard to learn, it sounds foolish that you are now called to give it all away. In the wisdom of God your calling is to take up the cross, dying to love.

Wherever it is that you will find yourself following Christ when you leave Princeton Theological Seminary, it will not be long before you discover that nothing of eternal significance is going to happen until you give up. You are called to give up your dreams and your criticism of community, your well-deserved expertise, all of the other voices on the panel discussion in your mind, and especially your anxieties about how to succeed. Surrender to the call to love. Only then will God's dreams for your community arise. And only then will you discover holy wisdom. Amen.