IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

Pastor Theologian Program Essay

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I. INTRODUCTION

It has been assumed by the Pastor Theologian Program, and I myself have assumed, that there is a crisis in theology and the church. This past year our focus has been on the crisis in biblical authority. In my previous essays I have tried to indicate, both implicitly and explicitly, that this is a theological crisis of the first order. That is to say, if any resolution of this crisis is to be found it must include a new, i.e., reformulated, theology of scripture. While the emergence of the present crisis in biblical authority can hardly be understood apart from the widespread acceptance of historical-critical methods of biblical study, this crisis will not be resolved by some new hermeneutic or methodology of interpretation. This crisis is not to be resolved by resort to literary or narrative approaches, for example, whether or not these approaches are bolstered by the claims of a canonical biblical theology.

In the first place, the crisis in theology and the church is part of a much larger intellectual and spiritual crisis in the West that can hardly be understood apart from what academics call post-modernity. Post-modernity may be characterized as marked by the rise of historical consciousness and an increasingly pluralistic global cultural awareness. Less obviously, but possibly even more importantly, post-modernity is marked by the growing awareness that all social reality is not only historically and culturally conditioned, but also humanly constructed. We are not only the products of our times and circumstances, we are also in some sense the makers of these times and circumstances. We contribute to the construction of the social worlds of ideas, beliefs, artifacts, and institutions that we inhabit. In this context there is hardly anything of the Christian tradition that is not called into question or rendered problematic. The situation calls for thorough-going theological reformulation of the Christian faith. Attempts to finesse the intellectual challenges of post-modernity by reassertion of the Christian tradition without such reformulation can only lead to more insular and authoritarian expressions of Christianity, which may well survive but will hardly be able to offer compelling moral and spiritual guidance to the contemporary world.

In the second place, the biblical witness is inherently unsuitable for resolving the crisis in theology and the church, insofar as that crisis is generally conceived to be a crisis of authority resulting from a lack of unity and consensus. Far from providing a uniform theological standard, the biblical witness is multivocal, multifaceted, multifarious. One might even say that it is pluralistic. The so-called "unity of the Bible" can only be claimed, if at all, as a theological conviction. There is first the question of which Bible--the Hebrew Bible? the Tanakh? the Roman Catholic Bible, with the Apocrypha? the Protestant Bible, without? There is also the question of which text or texts, i.e., which are the most original or authentic of the available manuscripts, as well as the questions of translation. But even if one could finally and satisfactorily settle the canonical, textual, and translation questions, there would remain the fact that, by any objective descriptive account, the Bible is really a collection of writings, not a single

book. These writings are of different genres, dating from different historical periods, reflecting different historical circumstances and problems, with differing theological outlooks and sometimes contrasting theological formulations, not to mention certain inconsistencies in reporting of what are ostensibly the same facts and events. Meaningful and convincing claims to the authority of the Bible cannot depend on assertions of unity of content. Moreover, there is no methodology of interpretation that guarantees convergence and consistency. Any number of biblical texts yield differing and sometimes markedly contrasting interpretations at the hands of faithful interpreters. This is true whether the interpreters rely primarily upon historical-critical methods or literary methods of interpretation, whether they believe in working as canonical theologians or not, whether they assume a unity of the Bible or not.

This is not to say that one can find no convergences in interpretation of biblical texts either at particular times and places, or over certain extended periods of history. There are schools of thought (e.g., today's "Yale" school, or the "Chicago" school from early in this century) and there are traditions of interpretation (Lutheran, Reformed, etc.). Neither is it to say that the "truth" of scripture can never be proclaimed. It is to say that whatever truths come to expression through the scriptures cannot be distilled without remainder to a univocal set of propositions or coherent systematic doctrines. It is to say that a single universal and enduring consensus regarding what constitutes the proper or correct interpretation of most passages of scripture, and perhaps also of scripture as a whole, would seem to lie beyond our grasp.

II. THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

Is this situation a problem for biblical interpretation? Is it a problem for theology? It all depends upon what one thinks the tasks of biblical interpretation and theology are. Here I would like to repeat some observations from an earlier essay on the nature of scripture as witness.

All ministers, elders, and deacons to be ordained and installed in the Presbyterian Church must answer the following question in the affirmative: "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" That the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are unique and authoritative witness seems to me relatively unproblematic and true. In fact, it is as witness that I believe they are best to be understood--the witness by individuals and communities, born of experience and faith, to divine reality in their history and in their midst. Even so, one must have a broad understanding of witness to include within this rubric such biblical works as Esther, where there is no mention of God nor any allusion to matters divine, and Ecclesiastes, in which human experience seems to be characterized more by uncertainty, ambiguity, vanity, and theological agnosticism than by witness to divine reality.

Other particulars of the ordination "vow", specifically the identification of Jesus Christ as the referent of Old as well as New Testament scriptures, and the identification of these scriptures as "God's Word", are wholly contingent upon the crucial qualification, "by the Holy Spirit." Without the Holy Spirit, the Old Testament scriptures have nothing to say about Jesus Christ. And without the Holy Spirit, the authoritative witness of both Testaments falls short of being "God's Word" to me or to anyone else. The other qualifying phrase, "in the Church universal," is largely tautological. That is to say, the Church universal can only be defined or identified as existing where the scriptures actually function as the sort of witness here claimed, and where the

scriptures do so function, the Church exists. All the same, it is clear that it was by means of an actual historical process that members of an institutionalized Church made the decision over time to designate certain writings as scripture and others not, presumably on the basis of judgments regarding the authoritativeness of their witness. Biblical authority, in this view, arises basically from a process of authentication through experience. There is no external warrant that can make scripture authoritative, though there are teachings and doctrines that make such assertion. The final proof remains in the eating of the pudding.

Obviously, nothing in this understanding of scripture requires the view that scripture is infallible, either in its particular accounts of events or in its theological witness. To be authoritative, even uniquely so, and even "by the Holy Spirit," does not mean to be wholly without error. The Holy Spirit may be without error, but no one else in the transmission process is! To be authoritative is to claim my careful attention as a person of faith, but it is not to coerce my powers of intellect and spiritual discernment. Nothing in this understanding of scripture requires the view that only those writings that have come to be regarded as scripture can function authoritatively as witness to Jesus Christ or to divine reality, nor must one conclude that all the writings contained within both Testaments are equally authoritative in any particular respect. This is to say that the process by which certain writings have come to be regarded as scripture and placed within the canon is not to be regarded as infallible, any more than the contents of those writings must be considered so. It is also to say that even the best possible judgments of one historical period are not categorically immune to improvement. If it could be proved that some of the extrabiblical sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, for example, are authentic words of Jesus, such sayings would surely deserve our attention to such an extent that we might be led to revise our understanding of other teachings attributed to him. Moreover, if a third millennium shepherd were to discover a manuscript in an earthen jar in a cave near Qumran purporting, credibly upon careful scholarly examination, to be from the hand of Yeshua bar Joseph of Nazareth, Christians would be obliged to regard its contents no less carefully and no less seriously than any other teachings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament.

The story is told about Paul Tillich who, when asked what difference it would make for Christian faith if Jesus' remains were to be found in a sealed tomb near Jerusalem, answered to the effect, "None at all." I quite agree; the resurrection is not about resuscitation. If some new teachings of Jesus were to be discovered, however, or if new sources came to light regarding Jesus' life and ministry, and if these were judged with a high degree of probability to be authentic teachings or reliable accounts, it is at least conceivable that a great difference could be made. To argue otherwise, it seems to me, is to argue against the significance of what Christians have called the Incarnation.

III. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

As things now stand, what is required of the scriptures for them to continue to be authoritative for Christian faith is their capacity to continue to bear witness, by the Holy Spirit, to divine reality, most specifically, to God as we have come to know God through the person of Jesus whom we call the Christ. It is not possible to say, *a priori*, <u>how</u> authoritative the scriptures are, in this view. We can say <u>that</u> they are authoritative, and that for Christians they are clearly more authoritative than any other collection of writings or texts. We can also say something about <u>how</u> it is <u>that</u> they are authoritative. The following points, adapted from an earlier essay, still seem to me to be sound:

1) There is no single, normative method for biblical interpretation; biblical texts function, first of all, as sources for further reflection and conversation within communities that understand themselves to exist in historical continuity with the texts and their antecedent and interpretive traditions;

2) If it can be said that scripture is normative, this must be understood to be descriptive of the biblical witness as it is appropriated in the life of the religious community; the meaning of the bare text of scripture is hardly self-evident, nor would that meaning necessarily be normative for the religious community if evident; scripture remains authoritative so long as it continues to be appropriated as a basic source for reflection, conversation, and identity, within religious communities;

3) The truth of scripture is to be found in its capacity--by the Holy Spirit--to mediate to us an apprehension or understanding of God, the universe, and human life; that scripture possesses this capacity accounts for its continued appropriation and authority;

4) What is normative or truthful in scripture is to be discerned within a narrative context, all the parts of which are not equally significant or normative or true; the truth of any scriptural text must be mined from its textual context--not taken out of context!--by acts of imaginative and reflective engagement within the context of the community or culture for which it is scripture; such discernment of the truth of the text may not account for all of the particular features of the narrative;

5) Biblical interpretation is a profoundly theological undertaking.

IV. THE CREEDS

It needs also to be noted that, at least for most Protestants, the scriptures are more authoritative than the creeds of the Christian Church, which are to be regarded as derivative from them. This subordinate authority of creeds to scripture is clearly acknowledged among Presbyterians, both in our Book of Confessions and in our Book of Order. Given what has already been said, however, it is not immediately clear why this should be so. Do the creeds not give expression to the "authentic" or "true" voice of scripture regarding divine reality, as the Church has discerned this voice "by the Holy Spirit"? If the creeds were primarily forms of testimony or witness, this might at least in theory be the case. However, the creeds are more nearly formulations of belief ("credo" = "I believe") or doctrine. The biblical witness is not to be adequately comprehended by statements of belief. The biblical witness, as has already been noted, is more accurately the testimony of individuals and communities to their experience of the reality of God as known to them in faith. The creeds, on the other hand, are attempts to state more generally what this divine reality is, means, and does.

The following analogy, though overly simply, may be helpful: The biblical witness is like a description of the experience of eating of ice cream. The ice cream obviously has certain sensible features that are capable of description: taste, color, texture, temperature. A description of eating ice cream will be an account based on actual experience. Not everyone will experience or describe the eating of ice cream in the same way, yet we will grant to all that they what they have eaten is the same thing. Creeds, on the other hand, are rather like attempts to say what ice cream is. It may be important to have some conceptual idea of what one is eating when one is eating ice cream--especially if one is hosting a meal (dessert), concerned about nutrition (calcium), counting calories (fat), or lactose-intolerant (milk product)--but such knowledge is no substitute for the experience of eating itself, or even for the experience of hearing someone else

bear witness to their experience of such eating.

I focus here briefly on the creeds because the demise of biblicism in many quarters has given rise to creedalism as a substitute for undergirding the theological authority of the Church. Often this creedalism is very literalistic or fundamentalistic. The editor of THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK, for example, recently pronounced that "Christianity without the physical resurrection . . . is not faith in the living God" [Robert H. Bullock, April 12, 1999, p. 10]. It is of utmost importance to recognize that there is no creed, and no interpretation of any creed, that faithfully encompasses the convictions and speaks for all those who count themselves Christians. It is also important to consider that, were such to be the case, it would probably mean the demise of the Christian faith.

Richard Rhem made the point well when he wrote of "the heresy of orthodoxy, the evidence of a failure of nerve and lack of trust in the living God. It is the heresy of an inordinate lust for certitude that seeks premature closure, the shutting down of the quest for truth and growth in knowledge in the magnificent and mysterious cosmos by the creatures whom the Creator calls to consciousness and embraces in a grace that pervades the unfolding cosmic process" ["Interreligious Dialogue: What Is Required of Us," PERSPECTIVES: A JOURNAL OF REFORMED THOUGHT (May 1995), p. 15]. To this eloquent statement affirming faith in a living God, I would add that creedalism, or the elevation of creedal authority as a substitute for waning biblical authority, bears a striking resemblance to "works-righteousness": Question: What must I do to be saved (read "be a true Christian")? Answer: Affirm the creed(s). The only problem is that I cannot save myself by "right" beliefs any more than I can save myself by "right" actions! It is simply beyond my volitional power! Moreover, in our present world "right" beliefs are becoming more difficult to discern even that "right" actions. What experience and evidence compel me to believe, even after a thorough self-questioning by all my critical powers, is sometimes quite at odds with what I have been told I am supposed to believe. The God whom I worship and serve in Jesus' name is simply not conformable to any of the creeds.

V. THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY

My particular interests and concerns as a theologian have primarily to do with articulating the Christian faith in our contemporary historical and cultural context, permeated as it is by historicist and scientific methods of understanding and interpreting our life and the cosmos. The theological task is always to discern, articulate, and express the core religious meanings or central truths about ourselves, our lives, our world, and God from amidst the welter of voices that speak to us through our scripture and our traditions as well as our knowledge and experience of our world.

To accomplish this task, in my view, theology must first to try to make some sense of all the experiences of faith of the religious community, those of the contemporary community as well as those to which scripture and tradition testify. Theology must also serve a critical function in discriminating among such experiences those that are more authentic or true than others with respect to divine reality. If someone were to tell me that eating ice cream burned the roof of his mouth, or made his lips pucker, I would have good reason to doubt that it was ice cream he had eaten. This would be not simply because his experience was at odds with my own but also because, over the years, based upon reports of the experiences of others as well as my own, I had

come to some view of what ice cream is that excludes the possibilities of its being hot or sour. Good theology functions in much the same way, organizing our reflections upon religious experience to provide us some view and understanding of the divine reality, and critiquing claims to religious experience that deviate significantly from what we have come to regard as the nature of this divine reality that we experience in faith.

There is one point at which my ice cream analogy does not apply. Although one must eat ice cream in order to have the full experience of it, it is possible to know what ice cream is, at least in terms of its ingredients, texture, temperature, and other observable features, quite independently of its taste. Theology, however, has no direct access to divine reality except through experience and faith. We must draw upon our own experience, and the witness of others to their experience, in order to say anything about the divine reality in our history and in our midst. Experience thus serves as a kind of critical principle for theology, just as theology serves a critical function regarding experience. Theological claims that seem to have no basis in experience (others' or our own) are bound to be suspect. This is, in fact, good reason to question them. If we do not find sufficient reason to reject such claims, we are at least obliged to reserve judgment about them. Theological claims that seem to be contrary to experience are to be viewed even more skeptically, if not outright rejected.

VI. THE CONSTRUCTIVE TASK

This brings me to the threshold of the constructive project hinted at in the title to this essay. I would like to propose that the constructive task facing the Church today is to articulate a theology that will serve us well in life and in death. I do not mean to imply by this that the purpose of theology is merely self-serving, or that human beings are the measure of all things. I do assume, however, that God desires our good. That is a momentous and unprovable assumption. It is a matter of faith--but not of blind faith. It is in many ways a conviction born of experience. It is also a reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the whole of the biblical witness as well as the tradition and teaching of the Church. Nonetheless, it is anything but a demonstrable fact.

In an earlier essay I claimed that "God is one who loves." That is another way of saying that God desires our good. I do not mean by this that there is some higher or transcendent moral law to which even God must adhere. I mean quite simply that God cares about us, and about all creation, in a positive way. God does not want us to perish, but to flourish. God does not want us to suffer, but to enjoy. God does not want us to despair, but to rejoice. I am speaking about a relational quality that characterizes God and all creation, not least, the human creature. I am speaking about *agape*, about the love that Jesus and the New Testament attribute to God and call forth from us in our relations with God and neighbor. The theological question is this: How are we to understand this relationship in which we stand before God, so as to encourage the fullest realization of the possibilities of our lives in relation to God, to others, and to the world? What theological understanding is most consistent with a God who loves us and cares for us and desires that we and all creation flourish? It is also important that this theological understanding not fail us when all the possibilities of this life have been exhausted. In other words, this theology must also serve us well in death.

VII. TWO LIFE AND DEATH EXPERIENCES

In this connection I want to relate briefly two personal experiences that bear upon my own Christian experience and faith, and then make a few observations about the two biblical texts that have preoccupied us during most of our discussions this past year in the Pastor-Theologian Program.

The first experience goes back to the time when I was still a divinity school student making preparations for ordination. I had already completed most if not all of the work toward my Master of Divinity degree, including a year as intern pastor with the First Baptist Church of Marietta, Ohio, a several-hundred member congregation and the largest church I have ever served. My hope was to be ordained to the Christian ministry in my home church, the First Baptist Church of Rapid City, South Dakota. This was the church in which I had been raised since the age of 4. It was the church in which I had made my profession of faith and been baptized before the congregation. It was the church I had gladly attended mornings and evenings, almost every Sunday, until I graduated from high school. It was the church where I had regularly gone to Sunday school, attended youth meetings, served as an officer of the youth fellowship and as the youth member of a pastor search committee, and sung in the Chancel Choir during my high school years. It was the church in which I received recognition as a National Honor Roll Scholar of the American Baptist Convention (now "Churches") during my senior year.

In anticipation of being ordained, I wrote a letter to the pastor of my home church. He was the immediate successor of the pastor who had been called when I was on the search committee some years before. This pastor responded that there were certain questions that an ordination examination committee would be bound to raise, and for which he requested my answers. Some of the questions were theological questions that I readily identified with theological fundamentalism, questions that remain surprisingly current among many Presbyterians today. To make a long story short, I answered his questions with theological skill and nuance, in the most honest and affirmative way that I knew how. But my answers merely confirmed for this pastor that I would hardly pass muster with those whom he imagined would serve under his leadership on any prospective ordination committee. He advised me that my pursuit of ordination in my home church would likely fail. When I showed his letter to Walter Harrelson, the wise and gracious Dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, Walter observed sympathetically that it was "one for your file." (I was subsequently ordained by the Marietta Baptist Association in the First Baptist Church of Marietta, Ohio.)

I cannot say that the denial of ordination by my home church was a life-changing event for me, though it was surely one to remember. I later discovered that my parents were more upset than I, perhaps because I had some reason to anticipate the outcome. The experience was one of many I have had over the years that exemplify what the Christian faith is not, or surely ought not to be. The determined attachment to certain formulations of the Christian faith strikes me as wholly incongruent with the teachings of Jesus. It is a bane of Christianity that some who claim to be disciples of Jesus insist that others who claim to be disciples of Jesus must believe what the latter find themselves unable to believe. It is hard to imagine that some Christians prefer dissembling to silence (not to mention denial) regarding supposed verities of the faith, yet I have seen this sort of behavior over and over again. Some of my Presbyterian divinity school classmates simply "crossed their fingers" when they made their ordination vows, and took this to be accepted and acceptable practice. The implications of such insistence upon adherence to particular formulations of Christian teaching is that there is something more basic or important to Christian faith than the quality of our relationships with God and one another. The demand for orthodoxy, I submit, constitutes a fundamental denial of God's love. Christian faith, to be recognizably

"Christian," needs a center. Thus, we need a theology that is focussed and centered on God as known to us through Jesus the Christ and by the Spirit. From this center God's world is "infinite in all directions." A properly centered Christian theology, I believe, resists and subverts all efforts to circumscribe the household of faith.

The other personal experience I wish to relate took place a year or so earlier, just after I had completed my second year of divinity school. My wife and I had been married all of four days when we arrived on June 30, 1971, in Marietta, Ohio, where I was to begin a twelve-month internship with the First Baptist Church the next day. To our surprise, the pastor of the church was in the hospital with double pneumonia, having almost died of an ulcer attack some five or six weeks before. That he had not bothered to notify me spoke of his desperate need for my help. It was October 3 before he was able to return to the pulpit. Meanwhile, I took over as much of the administrative work as I could, recruited guest preachers, led the mid-week Bible study and prayer meeting, preached a few Sundays myself, tried to fend off the pastor's detractors who were attempting to exploit the situation in order to force his departure, and endeavored to help both the pastor and his wife deal with their multiple sources of distress and their sense of loss of control.

On the afternoon of Friday, October 8, the pastor came home from visiting members in the hospital, had a heart attack in his front yard, and died. Sunday was Layman's Sunday, so the chair of the Board of Deacons, the Area Minister, and I presided at the 9:45 a.m. service in the spirit that the ministry would go on. About 11:30 a.m., midway through the church school hour, the steam boiler in the educational building exploded, killing four ninth and tenth graders and their teacher, the husband of the church organist and father of a young child. Two other youths were seriously injured; one would be in the hospital until Christmas, the other until May. The next day we had the funeral for the pastor. A day or two later we had the funerals for the four young people and their teacher. The next Sunday, October 17, I preached the morning sermon on "Reflections of the Meaning of the Resurrection." The mother of one of the youths who was killed soon became temporarily psychotic. The widow of the pastor became severely neurotic and mentally ill. It was February before a full-time interim pastor was secured. Later, the state of Ohio passed a new low-pressure steam boiler inspection law. As best I could determine from the state Fire Marshall's report, the explosion would not have happened without some combination of human and mechanical error. Before going to Marietta I was undecided about pursuing ordination. I returned to Vanderbilt Divinity School having received my call to parish ministry. (I guess I must have concluded that it couldn't get any worse than Marietta; if I could survive what happened there I could probably survive whatever else the parish ministry might bring. In truth, I was also convicted of the importance of this calling.)

VIII. SERVICEABLE THEOLOGY

Any theology worth its salt must be serviceable not only in life, but also in death. It must be a theology that comprehends the awesome and tragic and downright stupid and evil realities of our existence, without resorting to pious impieties. Among the handful of letters that were sent to the church following this nationally publicized tragedy were several that suggested the explosion must have been an act of God in punishment for some sinful or evil behavior going on. The widow of the pastor felt (with some good reason) that her husband had been crucified by the church, and there were doubtless some church members who must have wondered if the explosion had not been a manifestation of the wrath of God. I was too young and too numb to feel everything that a more experienced pastor would have felt, but hardly oblivious to the many

and various ways in which weak and shallow theologies get twisted and deformed under the pressure of such events. When a local television newsman began his interview with me on the evening of the explosion by asking a loaded question implying that the church must have a "conservative" theology, I thought to myself, what the hell does that have to do with anything. I answered him, "No comment." It was a very short interview.

To make another long story short, I do not believe in a God who plays around with low pressure steam boilers. I do not believe in a God who punishes church people, even faithless, mean-spirited, small-minded, uncharitable church people, by killing the children and loved ones of their congregation. I do not believe in a God who demands anyone's life in exchange for redemption. But I do believe in a God who can bring redemption--and resurrection--out of suffering and tragedy, out of stupidity and perfidy and downright evil and death. I saw it happen in Marietta, Ohio. And I first heard about it in church long ago. And I read about it this past year in Matthew 26-27, and wrote about it in a previous essay in which I rejected any notion that it was part of God's plan of salvation for Jesus to die on the cross to save us from our sins. Not to be misunderstood here, let me say that I agree with James Gustafson when he writes that "fidelity [to God] does not lead to what we ordinarily and immediately perceive to be a human good, but that what is of human value must be sacrificed for the sake of the purposes of God" [ETHICS IN THEOCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE, Vol. 1, p. 278]. This truth that faithful existence before God often leads us to suffering and death, however, does not mean that God plots our lives to such conclusions. Matthew (and the other Evangelists) apparently lacked any way of understanding how Jesus could have been faithful to God, even unto death on a cross, without concluding that this had to be how God had it planned. I am as confident that God made good on Jesus' suffering and sacrifice as I am of anything one can say about God, but that God would not have willed or wanted it any other way seems blasphemous to me.

It has also seemed blasphemous to me to take at face value the statement in Genesis 22 that God commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, as a test. I know what the text says. Texts do not always tell the truth. Indeed, each time that God, or the angel of the LORD, speaks to Abraham in this text, what is said is not true: Isaac is <u>not</u> Abraham's <u>only</u> son. On most readings, Abraham is unhesitating in his obedience and faithfulness toward God. He packs up and heads off to Mt. Moriah with his son Isaac without the slightest hesitation or objection to God's command. He appears altogether ready to slay his son with the knife before the angel of the LORD intercedes. In consequence, God knows that Abraham is one "who fears God." This makes Abraham the exemplar of Old--and even New--Testament faith.

It is possible, however, to read the text in a way that accepts all this about Abraham yet sees it in a different light. Something needs to be said about the chutzpah of this man of faith. Is he not the same man who bargained with God over the destruction of Sodom, insisting that God not destroy the righteous? Is he not the same one who risked losing his wife, Sarah, the presumed female progenitor of the multitudes whose ancestor he also was destined to be, by trying to pass her off as his sister, first among the Egyptians (ch. 12) and then later in Gerar (ch. 20)? Of course, he says on both occasions that it was to protect himself, and by the time of the visit to Gerar Sarah was supposedly post-menopausal. Nonetheless, the Abraham of Genesis 12-21 is anything but passively submissive to God and, at least after Ishmael is born, hardly seems anxious about the promise God has made to him. Clearly, however, God looks out for Abraham through all of his adventures.

Reading the Genesis 22 narrative in context and from a somewhat ironic perspective, one might conclude that it is as much or more about Abraham's testing of God as it is about God's testing of Abraham. Surely Abraham knows by now that God wants the promise to him fulfilled. The promise has been reiterated several times. Abraham must suspect that God has as much at stake as he, Abraham, in preserving the life of Isaac. The statement by Abraham to Isaac in verse 8, "God himself will provide the lamb . . ." might also be translated and interpreted more provocatively, "Let God himself provide the lamb . . ." A literary interpretation of the text, without preconceived theological parameters, opens the possibility that Abraham is so confident of God, so certain of God's own commitments, so sure that God will make good on the promise, that he can play "chicken" with God and win. Alternatively, he can proceed with every intention of killing his own son, Isaac, if it comes to that--knowing that if God is for real, and if the promise is for real, then God had better make sure it does not come to that. Such an interpretation in no way denigrates God, does it? Better a God who picks on someone "his own size" than a God who looks for easy marks.

At the same time, this interpretation explains some things about Abraham that do not fit the portrait of him as one who is obedient and/or faithful because he fears, above all, to breach the special relationship he has with God, as one who so fears the loss of that relationship that he would rather kill his own son. What makes Abraham an exemplar of faith and, ironically, earns him the designation of one "who fears God," is his virtual fearlessness before God. Here is a man who will make a God out of God, so to speak, if anybody can! The last thing he wants is for God not to be God. (Only Job of all the Old Testament characters rivals Abraham's brashness before God and Abraham's insistence that God live up to Divine reputation.) Abraham's primary focus in this story seems to be on making sure that God has the opportunity to do God's thing! No other considerations are apparent. Abraham takes off for the mountains without consulting Sarah, and without any apparent misgiving. He binds Isaac and lays him upon the altar without any evident concern for the trauma to his son. When it is all over, he returns without Isaac, to a Sarah who dies, but with the knowledge that God will not let the promise fail. Abraham fails miserably as a family man--remember, he had long ago left his family of origin back in Haran--but that is not the point of the story. Purporting to be about Abraham, "who fears God" with an almost ruthless fearlessness, the text actually shows us a God who is ultimately to be trusted rather than feared.

I offer this alternative interpretation of Genesis 22 for two reasons: First, to illustrate how a literary interpretation of the text can diverge as far from conventional piety as any historical-critical interpretation. There is no interpretative method that can secure the authority of scripture against the challenges of post-modernity, if what is required is some clear consensus or convergence regarding the normative reading of biblical texts. Second, to suggest a bit of how biblical interpretation needs to be opened up by theological considerations that will serve us well in life and in death. An interpretation of Genesis 22 that focusses mainly upon God's testing of Abraham makes God out to be something of a monster and the life of faith as something of a burdensome trial. Life marked by submission to Divine commands that appear arbitrary or worse, cruel, is hardly to be desired. Feminist interpreters understandably find such an interpretation problematic, and so should we all. If, however, Abraham can be seen as one who is himself capable of putting God to the test, then the focus shifts away from the oppression of submission. Even more to the point, if Abraham can been seen as one "who fears God" precisely by not being afraid of God, precisely because he is willing to hold God accountable to be God, precisely because he does not believe that God will renege on the promise regardless of his impertinence (he is even willing to kill his son, for God's sake!), then we have come closer to an understanding of faith that encompasses trust and love. This is made explicit in I John 4:18:

"Perfect love casts out fear." The challenge of Christian theology is to provide us an understanding of God as One who is ultimately not to be feared, as One to whom we can be reconciled, as One whom we can trust, as One whom we can love--without having to kill. This is Christian theology in the service of life.

Is it also Christian theology that will not fail us in death? For Abraham, God provides the lamb, but we know it does not always turn out that way for us. We lose our loved ones. We ourselves suffer and die without all the promises of life being fulfilled. Jesus expires on the cross. The scriptures command us not to put God to the test. The command sounds like a call to remember our place. What business is it of ours to go around making demands of God? But the command may also be a reminder that God is not always able to deliver us from the grip of death. No sense in putting ourselves or those we love unnecessarily in harm's way, whether to try to force God's hand or prove a point with our neighbors. Life's troubles and perils are sufficient without looking for predicaments from which God must save us.

It is asking far too much of Christian theology that it provide us a God who can spare us suffering and sacrifice and death. It is asking too much of Christian theology that it show us a way to be faithful without any unhappy consequences. It is asking too much of Christian theology that it make all evil and pain and suffering intelligible and somehow providential. But one hopes and prays that it is not asking too much of Christian theology that it assure us of a love and goodness that endure beyond our afflictions, of a God who transforms and redeems our sufferings, and who makes good on every gesture of kindness, every deed of generosity, and every act of courage and faithfulness. What we see in Matthew 26-27 are the courage and faithfulness, as well as the stupidity, perfidy, and evil that are part of all things human. What we see in Matthew 28 is the making good. There is much more to be said about the hope of Christian faith in the face of death, but that will have to wait.

IX. CONCLUSION

The crisis in theology and the Church today is, at the very least, an intellectual crisis. One wonders how long the Church will continue to insist on saying things that are no longer believable. We do not live in a three-story universe, there is no need to suppose that a virgin ever gave birth, and we are not to be herded into acceptable belief by re-asserting exhausted claims of scriptural or creedal authority. Theological reformulation is necessary, not to re-establish the claims of Christianity so much as to remove the intellectual millstones that are barriers to faith.

Even more basic to this crisis, however, is the unrelenting human quest for security, for validation, for certainty. We want to justify ourselves and save ourselves. We do not want to live in a world in which all that we can claim to know is provisional, tentative, subject to change. We do not want to have to depend upon appeals to authorities that are fallible, inconsistent, unable to provide us final and unequivocal answers to the disturbing questions of life [cf. I Corinthians 13]. We do not want to follow Paul's "more excellent way" [I Cor. 12:31]. We do not want to live by faith--faith in a living God. Yet we have little choice. Protestant Christians, especially, should realize that in rejection of the conditions and limitations of our existence there is idolatry, but in acceptance of these conditions and limitations there is grace. That which limits us is also that which gives us our possibilities. Let God be God. Work and pray that it be so!