

The Bible and the Liturgical Movement: Scripture as a Voice in the Church, Not a Book Faxed to It

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I want to begin by telling you my own personal connection with the liturgical movement. It happened way back when I was twenty-one years old and entered seminary in 1946. Those were the bad old days when you went through high school, college, seminary, ordination, and under after that. Actually, we are recognizing they were in some ways the good old days, too, because we got a lot of service out of some of those types who started early and who maybe even learned something along the way.

My very first year in seminary I read *Das Jahr des Heiles* by Pius Parsch—the whole thing—and I fell in love with it.¹ The liturgical movement always fascinated me, because it really began with the Maria Lach crowd in Austria, and they simply fell in love with the old Roman liturgy and all the old liturgies. I remember long passages on the meaning of the various Station Days. It's esoteric stuff, you know, but it was good. That really impressed me, and I've been a liturgical movement type ever since. I am also, by the way, a native New Yorker, a native Long Islander (lived there all my life), and I'm also a cradle Episcopalian. I think there are five of us left in the church. And, with minor revisions of cleaning up or simplifying the ceremonial act a little, I was and have been and still am an Anglo-Catholic of the deepest dye. So that's where I am and where I come from.

The Liturgical Movement: Bumps under the Carpet as the Work of the Holy Spirit

One of the wonderful things about the liturgical movement, I think, is that no judicatory in the church, or the churches, ever thought it up. It happened under the carpet of our history. Sooner or later these bumps would be in the carpet, these odd birds who loved old liturgies, and who read each other's books and visited each other's shops, and who finally went back to their own churches and hatched plots to get this stuff across.

¹Pius Parsch, *Des Jahr des Heiles: Klosterneuburger Liturgiekalender*, 3 vol., 12th ed. (Vienna: Verlag Volksliturgisches Apostolat, 1938).

And sooner or later, we have the Holy Spirit doing body German or body English, or body Latin—or whatever he was doing—on history, on the church, persuading us to listen to this.

Therefore, as a result, by the time you get to Vatican II, or to our most recent histories, you begin to get this stuff showing up. All of a sudden there is a thing floating around loose called the Common Lectionary. It accumulated. It was done. It was not commissioned. The churches all of a sudden realized it was there, and most people were trying to use it, and, therefore, we might as well pass it. I think that's pretty much what happened. Also, there were the revisions of the liturgy. Everybody has improved things to a considerable degree, and that's all good. We have got things back. I want to make a short list of some of the achievements of the liturgical movement as well as some of the things that have not yet been achieved in those departments.

The first one that strikes me is the restoration of eucharistic centrality. None of the reformers ever intended to dump the Eucharist—at least, none of the major ones. But, first of all, the anti-papalism that was rampant in the post-Reformation era led to the demise of the eucharistic liturgy as the Sunday liturgy of the church and substituted for it a kind of preaching service. The connection between the proclamation of the word of God and the eucharistic celebration of the Paschal Mystery evaporated. It got lost in the post-Reformation dumpster. It just didn't make it out of the post-Reformation period. The trouble with the Reformation is that all the Reformers, every last one of them, was a late medievalist—and this is not to fault them. Just as you and I, who are trying to invent something for the coming millennium, are all late twentieth-century types. That's where we grew up, that's where we absorbed what we absorbed, and that's where we're coming from. But we don't know where we're going. You can say that the Reformers were the first “modern” people, but they weren't modern. They were looking back and trying to make sense out of their history and trying to make sense of the things that went wrong in the Middle Ages. But because they were all late medievalists, they didn't spot them all. What they spotted, they reformed: works against grace; works out, grace wins. They got that one right. But a lot of other things they didn't get right. I won't go into that too much now, because I've done that elsewhere. So, that's the first thing.

One of the fascinating things is that, in all the new books, like *Lutheran Book of Worship*,² and the 1979 revision of the *Book of*

²*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1978).

Common Prayer,³ and the revisions of the Roman Rites,⁴ and so on, through all of the various places where new books have been issued, the Eucharist is in the center. Now, it hasn't caught up in practice yet. We started this, not by aping Rome, of course. We, the Anglicans, started this in the nineteenth century. Here's what they did first, since they wanted to have the Eucharist every Sunday, but nobody would stand for it, no one would think of it (they already had it once a quarter whether they needed it or not). What they did was invent the eight o'clock service. They invented a service that had no constituency, because no one ever saw one before. And it drew the odd old spinster with the little cryptic embossed, but not gilded, cross on her prayer book (you know, the high church types). So they had communion every Sunday that way, and then they started with St. Primus Day, which is the first Sunday of the month. And then, in the twentieth century, we started doing one and three Eucharists, and two and four morning prayers. Very quickly after that, one- three- and five-Eucharists, if there was a five, and morning prayer whenever you could work it in. And now an awful lot of the Episcopal Church has Eucharist every Sunday, every service, straight through, which is just the way things ought to be.

There is absolutely no question that *Lutheran Book of Worship* says the Eucharist is the ordinary Sunday worship of the Christian community. Right? Yes. Is it, in fact, that? No, it isn't. Lutherans have a much better track record in this than other Protestants, but nonetheless, you still have a long way to go. We Episcopalians still have some way to go on this, too. But it's what we're about. I think that this is the big drive: we will stop gnashing our teeth about the priesthood of the priesthood when the laity begin to appreciate, as the celebrating community, the priesthood of the laity. They have to have a sign, to understand their priestly action in the Eucharist comes when they are communed. When they understand that, then we've got a chance of restoring the weekly Eucharist and the unity of the church.

³*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁴See especially "General Instruction of the Roman Missal (1975)," in *The Sacramentary: Approved for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Confirmed by the Apostolic See* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1985), 19–50; or in *Catholic Rites Today: Abridged Texts for Students*, ed. Allan Bouley (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 192–225.

One of the greatest proclamations or rousing declarations of eucharistic centrality is in the preface to the new Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*.⁵ What an unbelievable document! I was sitting at a cocktail party, and someone dragged it in and read it. It's a marvelous statement, but most Presbyterians don't even know there's a new book, and the ones who know there is don't use it. So you've got a long, long way to go there. That's all the liturgical movement. The thing has been done before it had become widespread. It has been done before it had become accepted, before any institution accepted it. That's the Holy Spirit under the carpet doing all this stuff backhandedly without really muscling anybody.

The next thing that the liturgical movement has done that has really been a success is the practical, wholesale adoption, across American Protestantism any rate, of the church year—the calendar. That was an easy one, and again that just sort of happened. The calendar people printed them for everybody. People could buy them, so they got calendars that had pretty colors. So that's all good.

The next great advance in all the new books is the Daily Office, a Daily Office with serious readings. The Episcopal Church was bogged down for years in morning prayer on Sunday, and they thought that was what it was for. But the Daily Office is one of the greatest treasures of the ministry of the church. Also, it's obviously a treasure for the whole church. But it will never be a treasure for the whole church until the clergy read it. And I plug it anytime I can. Go and read the Daily Office. Do it! If you can't trust yourself to pay attention, go into the church, stand up, read it out loud to yourself, but do it. This is the praying of the church, and the fact that the scriptures appointed for the Daily Office are now three, and the eucharistic lessons are now three, are signs we're in good shape. We get a couple of good trips through the scripture every year, and every three years a repeat of the whole cycle. It's quite wonderful.⁶

I don't have too much patience, by the way, with the sequential version of the lectionary. I think that the thematic, the ordinary version of the lectionary is really a better version, because it makes us look at the themes of scripture. It doesn't throw us back on our notion of where scripture was going. The themes, the pairing of the Old Testament readings and the

⁵*Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

⁶For the Daily Office Lectionary, see *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 933–1001.

Gospels, and maybe all three, is not based on somebody's whim. It's based on old lectionaries and repeated stuff that's been done through history. It is the church's experience with the text of the Bible. And it's the church's selection of which of these texts really count for the proclamation of word and sacrament. The trouble with the common lectionary, of course, is that it is not exactly all that common. First the liturgical people got it out, but then every denomination had to put their fingerprints on it, so that the Lutherans and the Episcopalians sometimes are two weeks out of whack, especially in the off season. Unfortunately, the lectionary in a lot of churches is still not used as it was meant to be used, by which I mean, all three lessons every Sunday. It's the sacred hour and five minutes, and if it doesn't fit, some will leave all the soprano solos in and pull a lesson out. But this is not what the lectionary is supposed to be about. We're supposed to be reading it; we're supposed to be hearing the word.

Another thing I largely object to is the little printed inserts with the lessons on them. What are those assembled supposed to be doing? Proofreading this stuff while you're reading it? No, that's not what it's about. You should tell them, "Fold up the thing, shut your eyes, and listen. Listen. Hear the word of God." The word of God was heard for many more centuries than it has ever been read. It comes in through the ear, where faith also comes in. Right? Faith comes by hearing, by hearing the word of God. This is the thing that counts, the use of three lessons. I've been in lots of Lutheran churches where they have two; Episcopal churches, generally speaking, are better about it, but I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw them. My point is where you have leftover general American Protestant traditions, then you're still stuck with one lesson. And even if they do use the lectionary, they pull one lesson and that's it. That's the Bible for that Sunday. That's the word of God for that Sunday. We've got a long way to go on that, but still in the long run what we have done with the common lectionary is to recover scripture as the word of God heard in the church. What I want to insist to begin with, and this is what I am going to be talking about, is that the word of God does not primarily mean the Bible as a book. You know this. It means the Word of the Father, the Eternal Son, the second person of the Holy and undivided Trinity. That is the Word of God, and it's the primary meaning of the Word of God.

The Reformers had a nice phrase for what the Bible was: The Bible is God's word, God's very self, written. And Jesus is God's Word incarnate, right? And so on. You keep working it that way. But the point

is that the primary meaning of the phrase “the word of God” is not the Bible. It’s the One who speaks to us in the Bible. And the proclamation of the word in the Eucharist is not the proclamation of stuff *about* Jesus. It is Jesus speaking to the church in the Old and the New Testaments alike. This is what it is, including the sermon. I have to do that every Sunday; you have to do that every Sunday; we have to preach the Word himself. You know a lot of pulpits have this passage: “Sir, we would see Jesus.” Have you seen that in the pulpit? It’s often carved in the woodwork in the desk in the pulpit. “Sir, we would see Jesus. We would hear Jesus.” That’s what the preacher is supposed to be doing: Not talking *about* him; not telling people to *think right* about him, but to *hear* him. That’s what the whole recovery of scripture is there for.

The Paschal Mystery: Timeless and in Time

And, of course, at the center of all this, courtesy of the liturgical movement, is the restoration of the Paschal Mystery to its rightful place in the center of the church’s life: the mystery of death and resurrection manifested in all the sacraments of the church, manifested in all of the life of the church, manifested in all of the world to which the church is the sacrament of the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery is, of course, the Word of God incarnate in his death and his resurrection and his ascension. That’s what it is.

That’s what the Paschal Mystery is about. And it is a mystery. Mystery is something that is hidden, right? “Hidden from ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints” (Col 1:26). In other words, the Paschal Mystery is not something that God the Father poked into the world in 4 BC. The Paschal Mystery is something that is in the world from square one to square end. It’s in the world before the world is made, because even before the world is made, the project of the world, the project of creation, is being tossed around between the persons of the Trinity. And the world, when it comes into being, is simply that project realized within the Trinity.

The question that people need to ask is not, “Where is God?” The question is, “Where is the world?” And the world is between the lips of the Word and the ear of the Father as the two of them lie in the bed of their mutual love who is the Holy Spirit. Augustine said the Father is *amans*, the Son is *amatus*, the beloved, and the Spirit is the *amor mutuus*, the

mutual love.⁷ And that's where the world is. That's where the Paschal Mystery is at the beginning. It is there before all time. It is there because the Word is there. 'Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, in the beginning was the Word, καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, and the Word became flesh. This is the Word that became flesh.

It has a temporal component, because the timeless intersects with time, but the point is that the mystery is the hidden reality of which the church is the sacrament; and of which the church's sacraments are sacraments; and of which Jesus of Nazareth is the ultimate sacrament. But that's the mystery: Jesus of Nazareth in his death, Jesus of Nazareth in his resurrection, et cetera. Jesus is the Paschal Mystery, and that Paschal Mystery doesn't begin with Jesus of Nazareth. It begins with the Word who becomes incarnate within the exchanges of the Trinity. And, therefore, the Paschal Mystery is the world's property.

The Paschal Mystery is present, for example, in the first chapter in Genesis, in the account of the six days. The Paschal Mystery is declared as present in the world when you get to the third day, and you get seeds—you know, grasses producing seeds, and fruit trees producing fruit, whose seed is in itself. What is that? How do seeds work? They die. In other words, death is the seedbed of life in creation as such to begin with. That's the Paschal Mystery: life out of death. No death, no life. And when you finally get to the fifth day with the sea creatures, what have you got there? You've got everything eating everything else. And when you get to the land creatures, and what have you got there? You've got everything eating everything else. You've got a world of organic life that would not exist for ten seconds without death. You guys are all here, and I'm here, because an awful lot of critters have died to keep us alive. Vegetarians kill lettuces. They're not off the hook. This is an adumbration of the Paschal Mystery in Genesis.

Unfortunately, thanks largely to Augustine, we ended up with this kind of teflon Adam in a padded paradise in which nothing could go wrong, and Adam wouldn't have died; all that stuff is okay, but it's not a good idea, because the world wouldn't work without death. And a lot of the old fathers recognized this anyway. It doesn't work without death. You can't do tricks with it. The thing runs that way, and all the Gospels say the thing ran that way from the beginning, so that when the Word of God incarnate recapitulates all its disastrous history, he recapitulates it with the same device—death and resurrection. That's it. That is the mystery.

⁷See *De Trinitate*, VIII, 10, 14 and IX, 2, 2.

And the mystery is adumbrated throughout the Old Testament. When Adam and Eve get kicked out of the Garden, what do you get? You get the blood of Abel's sacrifice and then the innocent blood of Abel. And the life of the Jewish people comes out of that bloodshed and death. And then you have the sacrifice of Isaac, which, whatever else it may be, is an image of death and resurrection, roughly. And you have Noah's sacrifice and the covenant of the rainbow. And then you have the Paschal Lamb. Obviously that's where we get the Paschal Mystery.

And all these—Abel, Noah, and so on, all the way through Isaac—are sacraments of Christ. All are Christ in the Old Testament. That's what we're about. That's the recovery of the Paschal Mystery: we are not looking back at types, or allegories, or metaphors, or comparisons, or stuff like that. We're looking back there at the real thing, under various signs. That's the real incarnate Word in the mystery of his death and resurrection—there, and there, and there, and in the rock in the wilderness, and so on, all the way up into Jesus himself, which is the final revelation of the mystery, hidden from ages and generations under various signs.

Scripture is a voice in the church. It's not just a book. It's the voice of the Word himself. And the whole business of the church is not play acting or contrived suspense. You know, gee whiz! Palm Sunday—Three cheers—Jesus is going to be a triumph. Then we worry they're going to catch him. Then Good Friday—Oh!—he died and the tragedy! And then a very quiet day on Holy Saturday. And then all of a sudden—Wow!—three cheers, "He rose from the dead!" No! All of this is *done*. Palm Sunday is Good Friday before Good Friday; Good Friday is the triumph of the resurrection; all the church's acts and all the church's celebrations are the one Paschal Mystery.

Baptism is a Paschal Mystery under what sign? Under the sign of a death ceremony—drowning. This washing and purification doesn't work. It won't wash—not enough drops. The point is baptism is a death ceremony and a resurrection ceremony, right? What is the Eucharist? You receive a dead body and poured out blood, and that is your life. Death and resurrection—Jesus. And the same thing is true of all the other sacraments of the church, however you define them, whether you leave it at just two or go on to confession, or whether you do anything else you want to do.

I think one of the first things we really need to do is to get off the Reformation habit of arguing about what sacraments mean. We don't have to find out what sacraments mean; we don't have to find out what images mean. What does the image of the tree of life mean? Don't do

that. It doesn't mean anything. It communicates to you on a level below the level of the meaning-mongering mind. It really does. These images speak. My idea of Christian education is not teaching kids the catechism. It's hanging the images of scripture in the empty gallery in their heads, not telling them what it means, not telling them how to dope it out, not telling them what doctrines you can do. Hang those images there so they are unforgettably stuck in their heads, whether they know what they mean or not, because the images will speak to them. They will. If Jungian psychology has taught us anything, it's that those images are "down there." They have their own life; they have their own power. Trust them. You don't have to explain anything. You don't have to prove that it's real or not real. All you have to do is trust that it is an image of the word and just hold on to it, look at it, and return to it again and again.

These things are all about the presence of the mystery throughout the world, and this means that everybody is saved. (You try this on Presbyterians, and they hit the ceiling. It's the hardest room in the world to work—a room full of Presbyterians. Lutherans are wonderful.) But the point is the whole world is already saved, every last person in it, including Adolf Hitler and your brother-in-law. The job is done. Jesus takes away the sins of the world, right? Now you can't say he takes away the sins of the world except, "Oh, I just remembered Hitler, and I just remembered my brother-in-law." It would ruin the music in the first place, to tuck all those exceptions in.

His death and resurrection, the Paschal Mystery present in the world, *really* present in the world from beginning to end, has done the whole job for everybody. That's the meaning of grace. Grace is not something you have to apply for. The resurrection of the dead is not a reward for good behavior. It is a cosmic dispensation to the whole world, the whole "damned" world—because "while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6). The Father not only welcomes the Prodigal home, but even the elder brother, Mr. Grouch, who comes in whining, bringing hell with him into the party itself. He's in the courtyard, right? Picture it—music, dancing, waiters with trays of veal knocking him over. Here's what I think this is, since by now it's unquestionable that the father in that parable is the Christ figure, right? He is. And, therefore, when the father goes out to plead with the elder brother, this is Christ's descent to hell. He goes out and pleads. He says, "Arthur, look. You've got problems, forget them. Go in, kiss your brother, and have a drink." And, therefore, the Paschal Mystery is intimately and immediately present to hell.

And this is a wonderful parable, the Prodigal Son, because in all the other parables of judgment, Jesus's imagery for hell is separation imagery. Outer darkness, bottomless pit, you name it, it's out, gone, and so on. But the point is, in this one alone, you have present imagery for hell, because Jesus is a brilliant storyteller. He never ends the parable. He ends it with a freeze frame of the father and the elder brother—of Christ pleading with the damned. And for two thousand years we have never known whether the father quit, whether the elder brother went in, or what. Jesus just wants us to know that the pleading is perpetual.

And there's another trick I like to do with the parables; there is a Greek figure of speech called *hendiadys* which means one thing by means of two. *Hen*, one; *dia*, through, by; and *dys*, two. One thing by means of two: like "good and faithful servant," which doesn't mean moral and also religious. It means very faithful. Just like when I say, "I'm good and tired," it doesn't mean I am virtuous and sleepy. But you can apply it to Jesus' parables. Whenever he does two groups, whenever he puts in two groups, he's not doing good guys and bad guys. He's doing the whole world under two images.

Take the parable of The Shepherd Who Lost One Sheep—that's the name of the parable, you know, not The Lost Sheep, not the poor little sheep, trembling in the darkness or something. What drives the parable is the shepherd's own losing. And, therefore, in the parable of the shepherd who lost one sheep, the lost sheep represents the entire world as it really is, and the ninety-nine represents the entire world as we think we are. And the wonderful thing about that parable is—it took me forty-five years to spot this—when the shepherd finds the sheep he lost, he doesn't go back to the ninety-nine. He goes home and has a party. On the face of the parable, the ninety-nine are a set-up. Forget them. They don't count, and at the end I think Jesus has the sense to make them not count. He says, "There's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance." Did you ever meet any of those people? Never!

I want to do something now on the Paschal Mystery, but switching over to just the mystery of the incarnation as the mystery, the mystery of the incarnate Word, the mystery of the timeless in time, the intersection of time and the timeless. I am going to read an excerpt from one of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets. This is from "The Dry Salvages." That's the name of the quartet.

Men's curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation, either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time.
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the water, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood, is Incarnation....⁸

That's him. That's what lies at the bottom of all this stuff. It is God's gift to everybody. To Buddhists, to atheists, to agnostics, to Missouri Synod Lutherans—you name them, they got it. There is nobody outside. That's why it's by faith. Faith doesn't do a damned thing. It doesn't *do* anything. It enables you to enjoy what he has already done for you. The thing is done. You are trusting him to have done it, not to do it if you trust him. Grace is a gift. "He will do it, if you trust him"—that's not a gift; it's a deal. You can break a deal. You cannot break the gift of grace. You cannot possibly, in the silly phrase, fall from grace. You can certainly fall from faith, you can do it twenty times a day, and it won't make any difference, because you'll always have the grace. Twenty times a day you can say, "Jesus, I don't trust you at all." And ten minutes later, "Okay, I trust you." It's perfectly okay. It's going to happen to all of us; it happens to all of us all the time. You get up some mornings and the whole thing looks like a lot of baloney. Pipe dreams. Other days it looks better.

And another thing: you don't trust Jesus to do jobs for you, not even the job of salvation, not even the job of raising the dead. Why? Because when he comes to raise Lazarus, first of all he stays away so Lazarus is good and dead for four days. Then he finally shows up, and Martha comes down to meet him. She says, "Lord, if you'd been here my brother would not have died. But I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." And Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." And she says, "Oh,

⁸T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 27.

yes, I know. He will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” This proves she was raised as a Pharisee, because they alone acknowledged the resurrection at the end of time. So she repeats a Pharisee Sunday School lesson to Jesus. “Yeah, I know. I learned that in Sunday School.” And he says, “No! I am the resurrection.” I don’t believe *in* resurrection. I trust Jesus *to be* my resurrection, whatever that means.

The content of what I think resurrection is or can prove it is or isn’t, or what you think it is, or even what all the church fathers together think it is, makes no difference, because he is who he is, and we are saved not by what he does, not by numbers he works on us, but by who he is. And he is my resurrection. And the beauty of John—I think John is forever doing wonderful things—is that in John’s Gospel he perfects Paul by doing all kinds of things that needed doing with Paul, without doing anything Pauline with them. He does Johanne stuff with them. He repairs the synoptic Gospels. For the birth narratives, he gives you the prologue to the Gospel. For the Eucharist, which he leaves out, he gives you chapter 6, after Cana. He leaves out the Ascension, for heaven’s sake, and he gives you the high priestly prayer instead. He has no parables. The closest thing is the one thing about the Good Shepherd, but that’s not a parable, really, is it? There are no parables *a la* the Synoptic Gospels in John.

In Jesus’s synoptic parables, Jesus has placed the God character, the Paschal Mystery character, the incarnate Word character, in a character in a story—like the father, or the shepherd, or the woman with the coin, and so on. That’s where the Christ character. In John, he takes all the parabolic stuff and, without repeating a single parable, puts all of that stuff in the mouth of Jesus himself, in the “I Am” passages. That’s what they are. These are the Johanne parables, the “I Am” passages. “I am the resurrection.” “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Jesus doesn’t teach me the way; he doesn’t show me the way; he doesn’t lead me in the way; he *is* my way, and I am in him because he has drawn me: “If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself” (John 12:32).

Everybody goes into the bag of the divine vacuum cleaner. Everybody. If you don’t like it when you get in there, then you can go to hell. But you can’t get out of the bag. Just as the elder brother never left the presence of the father, hell is somehow inside the reconciliation. It is not outside. “If I go down to hell, thou art there also” (Ps 139:8). I know the psalm doesn’t mean that, but there it is: “If I go down to hell, thou art there also.” The psalm basically says you can’t get away from God. That’s true, and you can’t even get away from him in hell. No matter what

you do, no matter how much you object, he's still got you. That's it. That's why it's by faith. (I'm not even advocating what Origen said: "Sooner or later the devil will say, 'Oh, nuts. Let's get out of here.'" If you want to do that, that's okay by me. But I wouldn't do it. I think you have to have a serious tractate on hell in anybody's theology.)⁹

Therefore, according to the whole business of the Paschal Mystery, we are not saved by what Jesus says or by what he does. We're not saved by his words. We are saved by who he is. He is the Word of God. We have the idea—and we know better than this—that Jesus sort of spent his life studying to be the Savior of the world. Obviously, when he was born he didn't know anything, and then he had to learn Aramaic, and then finally he had done some scripture and was bar mitzvahed, and was with the rabbis at the temple at the age of twelve, and was a smart kid. But then silence till he's thirty. And then he developed his methods of teaching and refines this stuff. And then he does his triumphal entry, and then comes his death, and his resurrection, and his ascension, and so on. And all this time he has been getting better at doing the "Redeemer of the World" stuff.

Even if you know the ancient hymns of the church, you can't make that work. It won't work, because the baby in the manger is the Savior of the world then and there. He is not the "going to be" Savior of the world. The world is saved when he is conceived in the Virgin's womb. The world is saved when he is born in the manger. The world is saved when he cuts his hand and bleeds in his father's carpenter's shop at fourteen. The world is saved when he says nothing, does nothing, and goes nowhere for thirty years. The world is saved for all the time of his teaching, whether anyone got it or not, understood it or not, obeyed it or not, or anything else. The world is saved in the moment of his death, the world is saved in his resurrection, and so on. The job is done in him because of who he is. He is the Word who speaks all things into being into the ear of the Father. The reason I'm here is because the Word is calling my name, you know. He's saying, "Robert ..." Same with you. You're not here because you were four minutes ago. You're here because he makes you out of nothing now. St. Thomas once said if God wanted to destroy the world he wouldn't have to do anything. He'd have to stop doing something.

In other words, you are totally unnecessary, and so is this whole place. I'm unnecessary. This is a lark. I don't have to be here. You don't have to be here. You've got no guarantees. But you stand here outside nothing

⁹Editor's Note: Capon here is referring to the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, or restoration of all things, including demons and the devil, to the unity of the Godhead. Origen was one of several early church fathers whose writings included this doctrine.

and outside all your causes because he speaks you into being. And when he speaks you, you come into being. Here then, is the essence of the Fall: when he speaks us into being, when he speaks Robert into being, Robert says, "I don't like that version of Robert. I'm going to make up my own." So I make up my own version of Robert. We really do not believe I now must repent of all my versions of Robert, and slog my way through all this stuff, and work my way around to getting it fixed, and Jesus will finally accept the new version of Robert once I make what he had in mind, and then he'll like me. No! What we really believe is the Paschal Mystery is the intersection of the timeless with time. It is the perpetual intersection of the timeless with time. Jesus speaks me into being, and I contradict his speaking by sin. And in the moment of my sinning, he counters my contradiction, and reaffirms me to his Father as I really am in him. That's it. We're not talking about a project here. We're not talking about some job we've got to do. It's all a gift. "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for our sakes that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). In him I am already righteous. In him I am already made alive, together with him. I am raised up together with him, right now. I'm never going to get more raised up than I am now. I will see it better, but I won't get it any more. I am made alive together with him. I am raised up together with him. And the most remarkable of all, I am seated together in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus.

And so is my brother-in-law. And, therefore, while he and I are having a twenty-year feud, down here, we are, both of us, in Jesus, hoisting a glass to the bride and bridegroom at the supper of the Lamb. That's how he has me. And if I don't like that, or if my brother-in-law doesn't like that arrangement, then we can go to hell, because we will be in hell already. We'll be stuck, but we'll be in hell right in the midst of the party anyway, because the party is unconquerable. The party cannot be taken down by anything.

So Jesus doesn't save us by what he does; he saves us by who he is. He is the Father's only Son. One mistake people make is thinking Jesus is the Savior of the world because he alone managed to get 1600 on the "Salvation Aptitude Test." Now this is Reformation theology at its worst when it made bad mistakes: "Jesus is the Savior of the world because only he could offer the perfect sacrifice to God." That's Anselm before that, too. This is one of the medieval things they didn't catch right: Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice to God, and therefore, he is the Savior of the world. I don't think so. Here's what that does: it says that on the refrigerator door in the heavenly Father's heavenly kitchen there is a Post-It note, written by

the Father to himself, which says, “Remind me. I must look for someone who can make a perfect sacrifice for sin. Otherwise, the deal is off.” No, Jesus doesn’t go home because he got 1600 on the “Salvation Aptitude Test.” He goes home, he goes to the Harvard of Heaven, because he’s the president’s only son—by sheer pull.

In other words, we give Jesus jobs to do. That was the real mistake of Anselm kicking off the Atonement the way he did and then implying that sacrifice had to be the way. Sacrifice is a good thing. It’s a great image. And the Epistle of the Hebrews uses it right. But 1400 years after the Epistle of the Hebrews, it becomes the requirement. It becomes the cause of salvation, the perfection of his sacrifice, or the perfection of his moral life before his sacrifice, or as part of his sacrifice. And you start to build this great big thing, this huge cart, and you park it in front of the horse of who Jesus is. The essence of theology is to get the cart back behind the horse and the horse out in front of the cart. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do for a long time: To get the cart and the horse in the proper relation to each other. The Son takes us home by his pull only, and we get there only because he is who he is.

I have one more comment on the imagery of the mysteries of our salvation, the Paschal Mystery in general, and the fact that we are saved by the mystery, the mystery present at every moment of your time, of my time. To God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all days are one today to him. But he comes and intersects with time and takes all the days of time into his timelessness. God is the eternal contemporary of every phenomenon in time. Time is not a thing, you know. Time is not a creature. Time is one of the parameters or features of creation. God made stuff, and stuff is involved in time, but God didn’t make time and didn’t make space, either. He made stuff that takes up space. Space is an interaction. Time is an interaction. So God doesn’t make that stuff. He is an interaction. All these things are secondary ways of talking about the real thing.

The Mystery Expressed in Liturgy

The mystery of Christ is there all along, and I want to illustrate this point with two things. First, the Apostles’ Creed: by the end of the first century, the Apostles’ Creed had come to be used as a test of orthodoxy. But it started out as what? Baptismal profession, right? Of course, when you get to the Nicene Creed, you get the elaboration of creeds and the insertion of a lot theological stuff in them, which is fine in itself. But the

point is the Apostles' Creed in its original form, like the form in 1 Corinthians 11 ("I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you ...") is not a doctrinal statement. It is a list of mysteries of the Word whom we trust. He was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried. That's it. These are the mysteries by which we know the presence of the Word in our lives, the presence of the Word in all the lives of all the world. So the creeds originally are baptismal confessions of the Paschal Mystery, and we've got that back, thank God. One of the great things is the recovery of the Easter Vigil, which is gorgeous, gorgeous stuff. With the reading of the lessons, beginning with, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth ..." we have Pascal Mystery. Go to the Exodus; same thing. And the valley of dry bones; same thing. It's the same thing that's been there all along, and so the creed was originally an expression of the mystery.

My second point: there's a wonderful passage in the *Book of Common Prayer* in what is now called the Great Litany. It used to be called just the Litany. I'm going to read it to you in the old version, because there was a mistake made in the new version.¹⁰ I will come to it by and by. It's the third section of the Litany, and it's the section in which you say after each one of these lists of things, "Good Lord, deliver us." And it begins, "By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision ..." These are the mysteries themselves. The incarnation is the mystery, but the nativity is a mystery. And the whole of our salvation is in that mystery. By your nativity, by your birth, by the time you came out of your mother's womb and breathed deep and cried. By that, you save us, you deliver us. The job is done in that act. That act itself, because of the person who is in it, is the intersection of the timeless with time. That's what that is. And this particularizes everything.

"By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision." The revisers made, I think, a huge mistake by dropping the circumcision. They were afraid of it—because of Victorian spinster reasons or because they were afraid it was too masculine or whatever. But you cannot lose the image of circumcision, because it is inseparable from blood. That's why you keep it. It was a covenant made in blood between God and Abraham, or however, or whoever, or whatever—don't argue about these things. But that's the imagery of it. So that, "by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision," that in the circumcision of Jesus, the whole

¹⁰*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1945), 55.

world becomes Jewish. It does. That's the exact meaning of the passage in Colossians where he's talking to Gentile converts, right? And he says, "In him, you have been circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands ... in the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11). In something that happened to Jesus at eight days of age, the whole world, from start to finish, has become the chosen people of God. That's why Paul balked—it took Colossians to bring his thought all the way out—but that's why Paul balked so harshly at circumcision. The reason why he wouldn't let Gentile converts be circumcised was because they were already Jews in Jesus. They were. Sadly, one of the worst disasters that ever happened to the church came in by the end of the first century: anti-Semitism had set in, and led to the stand off between Judaism and Christianity as two separate religions, which is totally nuts.

But there is certainly no question that Peter, James, and John, and that crowd at Pentecost were proclaiming not the Christian church, but the renewal of the congregation of Israel in the pentecostal body, in Jesus. That's what they were doing. And I think it's grossly unfair—certainly to AD 64, before Paul's death, but even through Ephesians to Colossians—it's grossly misleading to translate *Christos* as "Christ." You should always translate it as "Messiah." And to do them credit, a lot of the revisers of the lectionaries have done that. They have tried to say that we were not inventing the Christ of Christians as opposed to the Messiah of the Jews. Jesus is the Messiah. The Gentiles become the Israel of God. That's what they are. And they don't have to go through circumcision because they have already got it. They've already got the fact of which circumcision is the sacrament. And, therefore, that's it.

"By thy Baptism"—the whole world is baptized in Jesus' baptism. What are we doing otherwise? We've got a universal Paschal Mystery. What are we doing? Farming it out customer by customer? One kid at a time? You don't believe that. Nobody believes that any more. Rescuing them from the fires of hell? Issuing their hellfire insurance policy to them? They've got a chit they can turn in? They get a promissory note? I think most people think at your baptism you get a chit that says, "Give to the bearer, on demand, one resurrected body." And they put that in the vest pocket of their souls, and when they die and their souls float up to heaven, they present their chit to Jesus. No! It won't work! You get it because he gives it to you. He is your resurrection—you can't get rid of him. You cannot get away from the love that will not let you go. It won't work. You can't do it.

Let me get back to the Litany. “By thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation”—by testing by the devil—in all those things, redemption is accomplished. Not about to be, not in process of getting there, but because it’s him going through these things, in all of these things redemption is complete. “By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat.” Alright—agony and bloody sweat. If the Father had said, the third time Jesus had said, “Please, Father, let’s not go through with this unless we really have to.” If the Father said, “Oh, alright! Let’s skip it!” the world would still have been delivered, because he is the mystery that saves the world. He is. Jesus is my salvation. He doesn’t give me salvation; he doesn’t confer salvation on me. He, in me, I in him, he is my salvation. “By thine Agony and Bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion.” Be playful with this. He got up on the cross; he suffered a lot. If he came down from the cross, he still would have been Savior of the world. He didn’t.

By his passion, by his suffering, “by thy precious Death and Burial”—and always remember that’s as far as Mark’s Gospel gets you—the women see the empty tomb and they’re afraid. They know only the burial, and a little bit of free advice that somebody told them. But they didn’t necessarily believe that. But by his burial, in his burial, the whole world is saved. In every one of these mysteries, the Paschal Mystery himself, Jesus, is fully present. “By thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension”—and the ascension is inseparable from the resurrection because what is the whole business of Jesus saving the world about? It’s about Jesus taking the world with him to the right hand of the Father, taking the world with him into the bed of the Trinity, into the exchanges of love between the *amans*, the *amatus*, and the *amor mutuus*. This is what the world is about. This is where our destiny is. We are not going to heaven. We’re going home to bed. I don’t think there’s a single word in the New Testament that means what we mean by heaven: a place with people on clouds with bed sheets and paper wings and pipe cleaner halos and little three-string harps to go “Plink, plink, plink.” That’s not a vision of heaven. That’s a vision of hell. You want that for eternity? Try it.

“Glorious resurrection and Ascension; and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, Good Lord deliver us.” And the last three lines, “In all times of our tribulation.” That means everything that goes wrong is your guarantee that Jesus is there. Your death is your ultimate date with him. The Word of God incarnate picks me up to take me to the prom in a hearse. And that’s why we plant the dead. Because death is the seedbed of life—always was, and in him always will be, and consequently in all time of our tribulation.

Watch out when things go well, but when they're going badly, you know it's Jesus, because he saves the world in the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the dead, and he doesn't care a fig about the rest of us. He really doesn't. He doesn't care about the ninety-nine sheep. He cares about the lost. And when you're lost, you're home, because the shepherd who lost you is nuts to find you. That's it.

"In all time of our prosperity"—that's thrown in for our benefit, you know. Even when it's good, you can't get rid of him. Because when it's bad you really might want to see some help, but when it's good you say, "I'm doing fine. What, me worry?" No. But "in all time of our prosperity; in the hour of death and in the day of judgment, Good Lord, deliver us." And "in the day of judgment" means give me the grace to see judgment this way: It's when you, Jesus, hand me, Robert, to the Father, and say, "Here, Dad. This here is Robert. What do you think of him?" The only thing the Father is ever going to say over the Robert that Jesus holds before the Father is, "My, my! I like that. What a wonderful thing you've done with him. Just what I always had in mind for him. Thank you very much." That was the first word spoken over anybody, and the last judgment is going to be the approval of God the Father on you and me and everybody as we appear in the hand of Jesus.