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The Aporetic Witness

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The Aporetic Witness

Susan Biesecker-Mast

Introduction

I do not think that we live in a pluralistic world, if by that we mean a global context in which every difference is valued the same as every other. On the contrary, in our world white is better off than black, the West encroaches on the East, Microsoft beat Apple, and the logic of capitalism governs all circuits of exchange that matter.

Of course, today's differences are not the same as yesterday's differences. Whereas yesterday's differences tended to be viewed as natural, given, and immutable, today's differences tend to be seen as cultural, historical, and contingent. But even if today's differences are considered contingent and thus more easily changed, they are ranked and compared nonetheless. Even the constantly changing differences (or products) of consumer capitalism are valued and organized.

To test this point, try to convince an adolescent that a pair of Nike athletic shoes is just as cool as a pair of Airwalk athletic shoes. The very logic that makes it possible to sell the latest anything—be it a shoe, a minivan, a computer—presumes that “newer” is better, even if what is “newer” these days looks like something from the fifties. In short, ours is a world that turns on the better and worse, not the different but equal.

If differences are hierarchized, then they are ordering our world so that some people, things, and styles are valued while others are devalued. But if differences are not immutable, then we may be able to change them and, thereby, alter what is considered true and untrue, worthy and unworthy, wise and unwise. Hence, to use the shoe example again, although it is unlikely that you will succeed in convincing the adolescent that one brand of shoe is just as good as another, it is possible.

As Anabaptists we have known throughout our history that the current order is never the same as God's reign. Until the reign of God is

fully realized there will always be a very big difference between God's way and the ways we human beings make sense out of differences.

But while the chasm between our world and the reign of God has not changed over time, what may be different for us now is that postmodernity—this context of hierarchized but changing differences—may be an opportunity for our witness to make a difference. Whereas in the recent past we attempted to differ from a world that was largely unwilling to alter its course known as “progress,” today we may find ourselves witnessing to a world that, though still hierarchized in troubling ways, finds new plausibility in our alternative.

The opportunity that this shift from modernity to postmodernity may have opened for faith to speak to reason has not gone unnoticed by theologians. Indeed a number of what we might call postmodern theologians have advocated various ways that Christians ought to witness in their contemporary context. However, because these theologians have tended to mistake our postmodern world for a pluralistic world, they also have tended to write theologies that promote cultural security over faithful witness.

Three Theological Responses to Postmodernity

The Communitarian Response

The communitarian response (also known as postliberal theology) is perhaps the postmodern theology that takes most seriously the proposition that we live in a pluralistic world.¹ According to communitarians, religions do not consist of God's singular truth or express some core Christian experience. Instead, they are cultural-linguistic constructs. They are culturally specific, since each is constituted by the particular place and moment out of which it emerges, and linguistic, since each is governed by a set of rules or doctrines with which any particular utterance (whether sermon or ritual) must comply. Taken together, then, religions are differently born and governed—pluralistic.

Although, for communitarians, religions will consist of versions that differ according to their culture and time, those versions can be comparatively evaluated. Versions that are more internally coherent or more consistent with the ancient doctrines of the faith should be evaluated more favorably. Thus, a version whose theology is most rational and whose utterances conform best to the idiom of classic Christianity should be considered “unsurpassable” compared to the rest.²

Communitarians argue, then, both that we live in a pluralistic world and that we should rank religions as better or worse. I agree that we should evaluate religions as better or worse, though I am not clear on their rationale for doing so, given their presumption that our world is pluralistic. In any case, I disagree with their criteria, which insist that a religion conform to the Enlightenment's standards of reason and require that a version of a religion reiterate the oldest doctrines of its faith.

The first criterion is troubling because it obliges us to fully subject religion to reason. Although Christianity may make compelling and logical arguments, as a discourse of faith, Christianity ought also to be allowed to outstrip reason.

The second criterion presumes that versions that abide by the oldest doctrines are the best. For an eschatological religion like Christianity such a criterion seems ill-suited since it will always prefer those versions of Christianity that reflect what Christianity has been as opposed to what it is called to become. Taken together, these two modes of evaluation appear to work against Christianity since they favor a conservative version of a decidedly utopian discourse.

The Triumphalistic Response

Like the communitarian response, the triumphalistic response assumes that we live in a pluralistic world. Unlike communitarians, triumphalists do not consider this change in context to be an occasion to think of Christianity as particular to the culture or cultures out of which it emerges.³ Instead, triumphalists take postmodernity to be an occasion to spread the word more widely.

With the end of modernity and its accompanying confidence in reason, triumphalists argue, comes an opportunity for God to become relevant again. People are ready, they say, to consider that God may have a role in the universe, that religion may be important for a moral society, that God is central for hope, and that God may help human beings resist the excesses of science.

For triumphalists, the end of modernity represents the liberation of God from philosophic and scientific assumptions that had rendered religion irrelevant. Such liberation enables Christians to make their case that God is central to life. Christians should not squander such an opportunity, triumphalists argue, but instead should seek to penetrate the whole world with Christian questions, values, and answers. Thus Christians will remake the world for God. Triumph indeed.

For Anabaptist Christians whose spiritual ancestors were executed by an imperial Christendom, such a response should be disturbing. Tri-

umphalists take our postmodern world only as an opportunity to exert all available influence so as to make our world over into their own particular Christian likeness. Their disturbing call ignores democratic politics, which are our inheritance from modernity and which were invented largely to protect freedom of religion. Indeed, the triumphalist response seems to be an attempt, however unwitting, to return to the days before modern democratic politics—that is, before discourses of freedom, conscience, and choice had sway.

In short, the triumphalist response is a call for a return to Christendom. As such it is an imperialistic call that responds to today's diversity with an attempt to make all others the same.

The Constructionist Response

Somewhere between the communitarian response, which is as culturally isolating as it is conservative, and the triumphalistic response, which sends the Christian out into the world but only to dominate it, we find the constructionist response.⁴ Like communitarians and triumphalists, constructionists accept the proposition that ours is a pluralistic world characterized by culturally specific and ultimately foundationless differences. Unlike communitarians, however, constructionists do not theorize themselves into a culturally isolating corner. On the contrary, constructionists argue that Christians must leave their communities and meet the other because others are similar to God insofar as they are, like God, a mystery.

As constructionists seek to move beyond the borders of their communities, they do not aim, as triumphalists do, to dominate the rest of the world. Instead of trying to make every other into their own image, constructionists want to engage the other in a manner that respects difference. One way to characterize constructionists, then, would be as communitarians pursuing a culturally sensitive public theology.

Of the three postmodern theological responses to our supposed pluralistic condition, the constructionist response is the most promising, because it takes seriously the culturally constructed character of any version of any religion without retreating to cultural isolation. It seeks to be an outward-looking yet nondominating theology as it calls us to converse with and be converted by the other. Indeed, these are well-made aims for these times in which our recognition of difference and our love of neighbor call us to seek the other out without also seeking to make the other over into an image of our self. But can these claims give full account of the deathly danger inherent to a concrete Christian witness? I do not think so.

I agree with constructionists that God and the stranger are mysteries. I also agree that we are obliged as Christians to seek out both. And I agree, as constructionists further argue, that doing so is risky. Yet I cannot understand why we should expect, as Scott Holland has argued, that contact with the other will always be an enriching experience.

In an essay in which Holland advances a constructionist theology vis-à-vis the work of David Tracy, he says that the Christian theologian will venture out because "she has counted the cost. She is convinced that a deepened self-consciousness, God-consciousness, and cosmic consciousness comes only through a creative hermeneutics of genuine conversation with the other. . . ."⁵

If counting the cost means that the outcome can be calculated in advance, then again I fail to see the risk. If I know beforehand that no matter who or what the other is, no matter what our conversation yields, I will be better off, then I have really ventured nothing at all.

As I said, I agree that the other is really other. But that being so, I do not think we can ever know in advance what the outcome of any interaction will be and whether, when we are done, we will be better or worse off. The cost of discipleship is, as Jesus insists, a self-denying, enemy love that surpasses all calculation of gain or loss.

Derrida's Religious Turn

As Anabaptists, we should seek a mode of Christian witness that is radical, defenseless, and gutsy for these times. To pursue such a witness, I suggest we consider the work of a postmodern philosopher who is usually passed over by postmodern Christian theologians but whose recent turn toward religion may teach us much about how we Anabaptists may give a confident witness in postmodernity.⁶ I am referring to Jacques Derrida and his recent reading of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac in his book, *The Gift of Death*.

Derrida is poststructuralist. This means that he takes structuralism so seriously as to push it to its own limits. Structuralists argue that signs have meaning only in relation to other signs and that their meaning is not a more or less accurate reflection of reality but, instead, a human construct and social convention. Thus, "cat" is "cat" only insofar as it is not "dog," and not because it refers to something like cat-ness per se.

Structuralists also argue that although meaning is not an effect of reality, it is nonetheless regular. Since a sign signifies in relation to other signs, its meaning will remain fixed by those very relations. In other words, signs work in structures of relations among signs that keep their meaning constant. Thus the name "structuralism."⁷

Derrida, however, stretches structuralism to its limits and, in the opinion of many, opens up some fascinating and surprising avenues of thought. According to John D. Caputo, one of Derrida's most informed commentators and explicators, Derrida makes at least two crucial contributions to structuralism that have the effect of constituting poststructuralism.

The first is Derrida's claim that although meaning is governed by the logic or system of relations that allows any sign to signify, meaning is no more determined by that logic than it is by reality. As Caputo explains it,

Derrida argues that, though rule-bound up to a point . . . the play of traces [or gaps between signs that are their "quasi" condition of possibility] is not a "closed system" but ultimately an open-ended play. He argues against the "closure" of the play and holds that the effects of which "iterability," the code of repeatability, is capable cannot in principle be contained, programmed, or predicted. It always [is] possible, in principle, as a "structural" matter, to repeat differently; that is built right into the very idea of "iterability" or "repetition."⁸

In other words, Derrida argues not only that we make meaning of the world by way of binary structures, rather than by way of a correspondence between word and thing, but also that these structures are not universal, trans-historical, or determining, as structuralism has held. Thus, although structures shape our utterances, so too may our utterances work on our structures.

Derrida's second contribution, according to Caputo, is to notice that language is not unique in these attributes. Whether we are talking about commercials, paintings, commodities, or people, meaning or order is made all the time by this operation of signs set in relation to other signs according to some one or another logic. Again, Caputo:

In addition to arguing against closure, Derrida also generalizes what was originally a linguistic model . . . so that *différance* [or how signs signify by differing from other signs and also deferring the meaning of other signs] is not restricted to language but leaves its "mark" on everything—institutions, sexuality, the worldwide web, the body, whatever you need or want. This does not amount to arguing that these things are all linguistic. . . . Rather he is arguing that, like a language, all these structures are marked by the play of differences, by the "spacing" of which *différance* is one of the names.⁹

Thus, structuralism is stretched beyond its limits to all modes of making meaning. The rules of grammar and the rule-breaking potential

of every utterance apply equally as well to every sphere of human activity. So, for instance, punk dress disrupted the economy of fashion as it fetishized the old in a system utterly dependent on "the newest."

Let me highlight two aspects of Derrida's thought that are particularly crucial and often misunderstood. First, Derrida's poststructuralist theory is antiessentialist but not relativist. To be sure, Derrida does say that signs are discontinuous with reality. But he does not say that they are all the same or that they are all valued the same. On the contrary, for Derrida, signs are products of differences that matter. In order for any one sign to signify, it must be set in relation to other signs according to which some signs are valued more than others. Some historical examples include the privileging of white over black in racism, man over woman in patriarchy, and profit over gift in capitalism.

Second, Derrida's thought is critical but not nihilistic. Derrida's work often involves interrogating the meanings, orders, and hierarchies that we have produced. Yet he does so, I think, not to rid of us meaning or order per se but, instead, to put us on the track of what has not yet been.

As human beings we cannot but make meaning and, in doing so, to set up hierarchies and to privilege some things over other things. For Derrida, however, the fact that we must make meaning—that we do not have the choice but to say this is better than that—does not absolve us of the responsibility to examine what systems of privilege we make or reproduce. So whenever we make meaning we are obliged, according to Derrida, to look out for what must have been put aside in the act of meaning-making. When we do that, says Derrida, we set out on the track of how our world might be otherwise than we have made it. In this way Derrida's thought is hopeful and creative, not nihilistic and destructive.

I believe that Derrida's thought may be well-suited to our non-foundationalist and nonpluralistic times. Enlightenment groundings have slipped out from under us, but meanings and hierarchies have not disappeared. Derrida's work may help us to appreciate these twin contemporary conditions and, more importantly, may guide us toward making our world otherwise. But can Derrida help us remain faithful to Christianity and, more specifically, to our Anabaptist heritage?

As mentioned above, Derrida has recently turned to religious discourses and specifically Christianity. Indeed in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida offers readings of a number of texts including Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac¹⁰ to give us a genealogy of the ethical subject that points us toward a new kind of ethical subjectivity, one that is, according to Derrida, decidedly Christian.¹¹

Derrida's attention to religious discourse, I believe, may teach us much about right relations and confident witness because Derrida's ethical subject is constituted in and by certain difficult relations with others. To flesh out all too briefly Derrida's ethical subject, I will seek to describe it in relationship to three others that are crucial for ethics, history, and sociality. These others are God, the future, and other people.

One of the lessons we can draw from Derrida's reading of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, in which Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his beloved son, is that God is utterly incomprehensible to us mortals. We cannot begin to understand how our God could ask such a thing of Abraham. There is no reason we can conjure to rationalize the demand of such a deed. And yet God asks it.

This is a God, Derrida suggests, that is beyond us or who might be described as the *tout autre*, the altogether other. Yet the Bible teaches us, Derrida points out, that this is a God of infinite goodness too. This is a God of unfathomable creativity, generosity, and forgiveness. Indeed, God's infinite goodness is every bit a part of God's otherness. Unlike us fallen beings, who break our promises, sell our souls, and betray our loved ones, God is goodness through and through.

Such goodness is not an object (as the Good was an object¹² in Plato's philosophy) that we might possess by holding it in our sight or comprehending it with our reason. Rather, it is an other. This, Derrida argues, is the particular brilliance of Christianity:

A personal gaze, that is, a face, a figure, and not a sun [as in Plato's philosophy]. The Good becomes personal Goodness, a gaze that sees me without my seeing it.

Not as a thing but rather as an other, such goodness is available for relation. We can be in relation to it. Indeed, argues Derrida, the Christian subject is one who has taken up a relation with goodness, with God.

God as goodness, then, is not something Christians can ever get their heads all the way around. Such goodness eludes us even as we are in relation to it. It is beyond us, as that which sees and knows us all of the time and that which we know is nearby but which we cannot see. As Derrida puts it, "God sees without being seen."

Knowing as much, we interiorize God's goodness in God's watchfulness. Whatever we do, we never can it do entirely in secret since God is with us all the time. These are the beginnings, then, of the ethical subject, argues Derrida: one, who in being in relation to the God of goodness and the God of all knowing, knows her works do matter as good or bad in God's eyes.

The second lesson we may learn from Derrida's engagement with Christianity is that the future is open. Of course, our modes of making sense of our world, all the structures of language and order we have built, will constrain us. We will tend toward the reiteration of what has already been the case. That is the historical burden of the world we humans have made in all its materiality.

And yet, the future is not determined by what we have already done. Rather, its outlines and logic elude us too. In this sense, Derrida argues, history is a problem because we cannot bring it under control:

The moment the problem [of history] were to be resolved that same totalizing closure would determine the end of history: it would bring in the verdict of nonhistoricity itself. History can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered. . . .¹³

History itself, Derrida is arguing, presumes the open-endedness of a future we cannot predict since history is the opening up of one moment to another that is other. No narrative of progress, no story of revolution, no relation of dialectical terms can anticipate or contain the transformation of the present into its other, the future.

That this is so, says Derrida, is downright scary:

We tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past . . . to a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, but, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely as unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached as unapproachable. Even if one thinks one knows what is going to happen, the new instant of that happening remains untouched, still inaccessible, in fact unlivable.¹⁴

Yet in that fear of what we cannot know in advance lies the possibility of the impossible. In the undecidability of the future is the possibility that the truly impossible, say, perhaps the reign of God, may indeed come to pass.

The third lesson of Derrida's turn to religion and, in particular, to Christianity is that just as God is other, so too is every person also other. There can be, says Derrida, no substitute of one of us for the other—not really, anyway. One of us might sometime sacrifice ourselves so that an other may be spared. Even so that other one will never be spared death for good. One day death will come. Each of us is concrete, particular, and finite:

Because I cannot take death away from the other who can no more take it from me in return, it remains for everyone to take his own death *on himself*. Everyone must assume his own death, that is to say

the one thing in the world that no one else can *either give or take*: therein resides freedom and responsibility.¹⁵

What mortality means, according to Derrida, is not that we are each unique individuals according to an ideology of individualism but, rather, that we are each singular. We may be like one another as, say Americans, but we are irreplaceable to one another. This is crucial, argues Derrida, for in that singularity is not only the possibility but also the obligation that we be responsible for ourselves. Since none other can live or die as any other, then each of us must take it on ourselves to do our deeds and to be held accountable for them.

Moreover, argues Derrida, our singularity is of God. Since God is wholly other, then everything that is also other is also of God. Thus, just as I cannot really apprehend God, so too I cannot really understand any other human being. Every other person is always, in the final instance and despite any similarities, a mystery to me. Hence, I can neither fully comprehend her, nor generalize to her, nor predict her. She outstrips my power to understand, as I do hers.

Free to Choose and Responsible to Choose Well

As Derrida shows in his reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham hears clearly God's command that he sacrifice his son but cannot possibly imagine what God means to be done. What can God as infinite goodness have in mind in this abhorrent command? God's will eludes Abraham; still he must choose whether to obey or to defy.

Therein lies a beginning for Abraham's ethical subjectivity: he has a choice insofar as he faces both goodness in God and the unknowability of God's will. As one who is in God's gaze and is of God, he seeks to choose well. Further, this choice is his responsibility. He will be accountable for it. Abraham cannot pass the responsibility of his choice on to God, even though it is God's command, because only Abraham and no one else, not even God, is in the position of choosing whether or not he will put the knife to Isaac's throat.

Thus our relation to God as wholly other gives us our freedom to choose in the face of goodness and our burden of responsibility to choose well. If God were not wholly other, if we could know in advance precisely what God would have us do, then we would have no choice at all. It is the being held accountable (in God's gaze) and the not knowing (God's will) that forms what Derrida calls the *aporia*, or impossibility, of responsibility that is the condition of possibility for ethics.

The undecidability that constitutes an action as a choice and that is an effect of the subject's relation to God is closely related to an effect of the second relation—that is, between the subject and the future. As I explained above, Derrida theorizes history as open-ended, capable of anything. This means that what we do in the here and now is of the utmost importance. Since the future is not over-determined by the past, it remains sufficiently open that our actions may have the power to shape the as-not-yet.

In short, the future is our responsibility. By that I do not mean that Derrida's ethical subject is saturated with a power to make the world into whatever she or he desires. Derrida is not resurrecting the modern subject who is entirely the agent of her own destiny. The burden of history is great. But in that burden are the traces of all the choices we did not make or that we sought to eschew and that, thereby, remain latent and available. The world might have been otherwise; thus it can yet be otherwise. What it will be, this new ethical subject cannot say. Still it is her responsibility in the face of the infinite goodness of God to endeavor to make the choices and take the actions to make it better. That this responsibility before God and the future is as biblical as it is terrifying, Derrida makes abundantly clear:

In the Epistle to the Philippians 2:12, the disciples are asked to work towards their salvation in fear and trembling. They will have to work for their salvation knowing all along that it is God who decides: the other has no reason to give to us and nothing to settle in our favor, no reason to share his reasons with us. We fear and tremble because we are already in the hands of God, although free to work, but in the hands and under the gaze of God, whom we don't see and whose will we cannot know, no more than the decisions he will hand down, nor his reasons for wanting this or that, our life or death, our salvation or perdition. We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death.¹⁶

Finally, as I have said, Derrida constitutes this new ethical subject not only in relation to God who is wholly other and to a future that is other than the past, but also to every other person. This ethical subject is to act toward goodness and a better future always through relation to an other.

This is an impossible responsibility. It is impossible because we cannot really know the other. How are we to be good to the other when we cannot fully understand that person's needs, desires, experiences, motives, and deeds? It is impossible because whenever the subject seeks

to be good to another, she or he is by necessity neglecting some other other. There is no getting around such limits. Insofar as each of us is singular, finite, and irreplaceable, we can only make one response at a time.

Abraham is acutely aware of this aspect of being an ethical subject. Abraham can only serve God, the wholly other, at the expense of another other, his beloved son Isaac. He cannot be good to both. In fact, he can only serve the one, in this case, by doing a terrible thing to the other. That is not merely an ethical dilemma. This is the very crux of being an ethical subject: that in choosing to do well by someone, the subject is by necessity slighting another.

For Derrida, then, there can be no purity, no comfort, and no self-righteousness in ethical action. Every good deed is at least a deferring of some other goodness left undone. If we are to be ethical subjects, Derrida is saying, we must bear the burden of all the options we did not take.

Now, of course, God spared Abraham the evil deed, in the final moment. But, says Derrida, he did not spare Abraham the act of choosing. When God removes the command, Derrida argues, he only does so after Abraham has already made his son a gift of sacrifice to God. Only when Abraham exceeds all expectation of anything in return from God (what could God give to compensate for such a deed?), does God remove the command and, in so doing, give Abraham everything.

Such generosity, a giving that exceeds every expectation of a balance sheet, every hope for a return, is what Derrida admires most in Christianity. When we face the other, Derrida is saying, we are called to give beyond any economy of expected return, even beyond the hope that we will feel good about ourselves. Since we are mortal and finite beings, we do not have the luxury of giving to one without denying some other. Thus the ethical subject will always find herself in an impossible position of seeking to express God's infinite goodness by a gift, all the while knowing that her gift will come up short:

I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define . . . a gift as such. This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible. . . . Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough.¹⁷

If we are to do good, if we are to be ethical subjects, Derrida is arguing, not only must we not expect a return from the other, we must also not anticipate some assurance that our gift proves our goodness. Insofar as we are mortal, our gifts will always fall short and our self-satisfaction

will never be forthcoming. Only God, who is infinite goodness, can judge the relative worth of our meager, though necessary, attempts.

Toward an Anabaptist Response

Our desire to theorize a confident witness in a pluralistic world is motivated by all the right impulses: the impulse to tell the truth and the impulse to do so ethically—that is, defenselessly. As I argued at the beginning of this essay, I do not think we live in a pluralistic world in which all differences are valued the same. Still I believe the twin impulses to tell the truth and to do so defenselessly. That is because, though I am no relativist, I do recognize that we live in a world of differences that are not what they used to be. Whereas in the modern context differences were viewed as fixed by the laws of nature, these days they are hierarchized according to relatively transitory rules.

Because our world is ordered by hierarchies that cause tremendous suffering, we must speak the liberating truth of the gospel. However, because we now recognize that our differences are not natural but, instead, synthetic, we must think the manner of our telling anew. We must remake a witness for a world of differences in which there are no natural anchors for selfhood. Thus the question, put simply, is how do we witness to the other without defensively protecting the self.

The most relevant feature of the Anabaptist tradition for this witness in my view is its concrete rather than abstract character. As Robert Friedman argued, Anabaptist theology cannot in principle be formulated into a system, because of its "existential" refusal to separate faith from life.¹⁸ Or, as John Howard Yoder has put it so well, "That Jesus Christ is Lord is a statement not about my inner piety or my intellect or ideas but about the cosmos."¹⁹

If our witness is to be, as Yoder and Friedmann have suggested, concrete in character and cosmic in scope, then we must offer our witness without reservation and with both body and spirit. We must give up those forms of Christianity which, as Michael Sattler wrote, seek "to obey God with soul and not also with the body."²⁰ However, as we have learned from Derrida, such full-bodied and spirited efforts to tell God's truth must, to be ethical practices, at every instance choose whether such witness will take the form of a confident claim or a critical question.

The Aporetic Witness

For our witness to be confident yet ethical, it must be aporetic. That is, it must be structured by an aporia, or two options that are as neces-

sary as they are mutually exclusive. These two options will not be subject in the final instance either to a hierarchy or a synthesis. We will not be able to settle on always privileging one over the other. Nor will we be able to create out of the two of them some third option that resolves the tension between them. They will be irreducibly opposed.

Therefore, every time we come to a moment of witness we will have to choose all over again. That will always be our burden. But that will also be the condition of possibility for our doing witness as ethical subjects since the undecidability of the aporetic witness will put us in a position to choose.

Of course, in choosing, we will also always come up short since, in truth, whatever we do will be only part of the full task. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has recently said:

A dilemma is just a task of thinking, whereas an aporia is a practical fact. An aporia is a situation where one choice cancels out another, but a choice must be made. You can't exist in an aporia.²¹

Insofar as aporia represents a moment that demands an impossible choice, it is, so to speak, where the action and, thus, ethics is.

So what will be our options? One option of the aporetic witness will require that we tell the truth as we know it and that we do so as persuasively as we can. We will make compelling arguments with strong evidence and solid reasoning. We will also make appeals that seek to motivate our hearer's desire toward Jesus' teachings.

Of course, we will seek to make of ourselves an example for our case. Thus our truth telling will not be limited to our words—it will consist in every mode of our daily living as well. We will tell the truth of all things to the other so that we might be instruments for that person's transformation. We will evangelize. That is, we will witness in the sense of testifying to the truth we have come to know.

How shall we come to know such truth? We will come to know it through careful readings of biblical texts, as well as texts of our Anabaptist heritage in the context of our community of believers. We will discover it in the life and teachings of Jesus as we come to these through our historical tradition. Thus we will read as a community the texts of the New Testament and especially the Sermon on the Mount alongside the *Martyrs Mirror*, our confessions of faith, and a wealth of historical and theological interpretations of that rich heritage.

We know that we cannot learn the truth either alone or from a neutral position. We must do it together, so that we can discuss competing interpretations, hear the differences, and seek to choose the truth. We

must do it from within the perspectives and biases of our tradition because that is who we are. We neither can nor should seek to escape our history. Rather, we should bring our history, and thereby ourselves, into a lively engagement with biblical texts and especially Jesus as our model to discern the truth.

The other option of the aporetic witness will require that we not give witness to the truth as we know it, but rather that we seek to witness precisely the truth we do not know. Since we are not omniscient, since we do not know all, we are assured that we do not own the truth. Our tradition, no matter how rich, cannot contain God's truth.

If we ever were to come to know all truth, Genesis tells us, we would be mortals no more. We would be gods. And that is simply not for us to be. Whenever we proclaim the truth as we know it, then, we are surely also telling nontruth. The whole truth is simply not ours to tell. God's full truth always eludes us precisely because it is, as God is, other than us. So just as we are telling the truth as best we know it, we can be sure that somewhere in some trace we are leaving behind is something of God's truth that we have missed. We will miss a point or smooth over a paradox or even out a tension and, just as we do so, some truth of God will escape our notice.

As witnesses, then, we must put ourselves on the track of those truths that elude us. We must be relentlessly on the lookout for what we have missed or ignored or hidden.

When we choose this option, we will be undoing the rules, pushing through the boundaries, shaking up the logics by which we have perhaps ordered our community or by which others have organized our world. As we seek out the truth that has not yet been, we will take on a terrible burden. Chances are we will cause confusion, loss for ourselves and for others. That will be our doing, and we will have to take responsibility for it. To be sure, if our pursuit involves upsetting the status quo for those who enjoy disproportionate power, we will be held accountable. But we will have to choose this option now and again because, if we don't, we will have forfeited our relationship to God as the wholly other.

As should be clear, we cannot reiterate the truths of our tradition and community while at the same time pursuing the traces of those truths which would undo our truths. There can be no synthesis or balance between these two options. We will have to choose one or the other, and we cannot know for sure and in advance which is the better choice. Perhaps we have some truths right, or right enough, that they ought not to be contested as much as reaffirmed. Perhaps these truths or others of which we are absolutely convinced are downright wrong.

I am, for instance, totally convinced that pacifism is true. I am certain that God wants us to eschew violence. Therefore I think we should reiterate that truth as often and as compellingly as possible to anyone we can persuade to listen. But I also wonder what we may be missing in that witness. As we have construed pacifism in opposition to militarism, what have we put out of our view? Have we imagined peace witness too narrowly? Have we failed to live it in as challenging a manner as we could?

If we pursued such inquiry, what would become not only of our pacifism but also of us? Who would we be? Who will we be if we do not engage in such inquiry? These questions could not be more difficult, because they are all about choosing one or the other of the options of an aporetic witness that will surely have consequences for whether we speak the truth or falsehood, as well as implications for who we will be as Christians.

The Aporitic Witness as Gift

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19-20, KJV).

As we give ourselves over to the great commission, I wonder whether we aren't a bit like Abraham on hearing God's command that he sacrifice Isaac. What is more precious to us than the truths of Christianity as they have come to us, whether through tradition or its traces? Jesus commands us to teach all nations; that is, to give these truths as gifts to others, so that they might transform those others as well. But what will come of these gifts and of us as we give them? Which gifts will we give? Will they help or harm? If they do harm, will we bear that responsibility? How will they be received? Will they be accepted or altered? Will we be praised or martyred?

If Derrida is right about what it means to make a gift to another, then we cannot answer these questions except to say that if our gift is to be a gift, if it is to be given in the spirit of God's infinite goodness, then we will have to give it expecting nothing in particular in return. Nothing, perhaps, except a sense of not having given enough.

We may not give in anticipation of gratitude or of self-righteousness. When we give in that way we make no gift at all since we are really only making a trade of God's gifts for our satisfaction. In truth, we cannot say what the reception of our gift of witness will be. The other may receive it as precious, may transform it into something else, may

take it as a threat. Since the other is, as we have said, truly other, that person is beyond our expectation, just as the future is beyond our prediction. If we are to give this most precious gift, and we must, for Jesus tells us that it is not ours to keep, then we will have to give it as Abraham gave Isaac—in fear and trembling and faith.

Notes

1. For an example of a prominent communitarian response, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

2. For his discussion of "unsurpassability," see Lindbeck, 48. Recently Nancy Murphy has taken up Lindbeck's notion of "unsurpassability" as a criterion for truth claims within a postmodern theology that she hopes may bridge the divide between evangelical liberals and conservatives. See Nancy Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26, no. 2 (winter 1996), 200. For an excellent review and critique of Lindbeck's theology from an Anabaptist perspective, see J. Denny Weaver, "Review of *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, by George A. Lindbeck," review, *Conrad Grebel Review* 3, no. 2 (spring 1985), 221-224.

3. For an example of a prominent triumphalist response, see Diogenes Allen, "The End of the Modern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 22, no. 4 (1993), 339-47.

4. For examples of the constructionist response, see the following: Joe Holland, "The Postmodern Paradigm and Contemporary Catholicism," in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, ed. David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 9-27; Scott Holland, "How Do Stories Save Us?: Two Contemporary Theological Responses," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12, no. 2 (spring 1994), 131-153.

5. Scott Holland, 153.

6. David Ray Griffin, for example, posits the constructionist project as positive and productive against Derrida's deconstructionist efforts which Griffin considers extremist and destructive. See David Ray Griffin, "Introduction to SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought," in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, ed. David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), xi-xiv.

7. If structuralism sounds similar to the communitarian response, that is because the communitarian response is based in a structuralist view of language that has been translated into a theory of the way religious discourses work.

8. John D. Caputo, "A Commentary: Deconstruction in a Nutshell," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 101.

9. *Ibid.*, 104.

10. For the remainder of the paper, I will refer to Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac as Derrida's reading of

Abraham and Isaac, because the former phrasing is cumbersome. The intertextuality of Derrida's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac through Kierkegaard's reading is important. So I am asking the reader to bear that in mind when I refer to it as Derrida's reading.

11. I believe Derrida understands himself to be on the track of one of the traces of history, namely, Christianity as it might have been had Plato's philosophy not influenced our understanding as much as it did. Thus he writes,

Something has not yet arrived, neither at Christianity nor by means of Christianity. What has not yet arrived at or happened to Christianity is Christianity. Christianity has not yet come to Christianity. What has not yet come about is the fulfillment, within history and in political history, and first and foremost in European politics, of the new responsibility announced by the *mysterium tremendum*. There has not yet been an authentically Christian politics because there remains this residue of the Platonic polis. Christian politics must break more definitively and more radically with Greco-Roman Platonic politics in order to finally fulfill the *mysterium tremendum*.

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29.

12. *Ibid.*, 93.

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. *Ibid.*, 54.

15. *Ibid.*, 44.

16. *Ibid.*, 56.

17. *Ibid.*, 51.

18. Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), 27-34.

19. John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 24.

20. Michael Sattler, "On the Satisfaction of Christ," in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. and trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), 117.

21. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Plotke, "A Dialogue on Democracy," in *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*, ed. David Trend (New York: Routledge, 1996), 211.