

PREFACE

This book emerges from a collaborative effort by me; my wife, Betty; our daughter, Kim; and our son, Nick. It did not begin that way. It began with encouragement from the family that I do some writing in my retirement. My initial idea was to build something around a selection of sermons, papers, and articles that I had given or written over the last half of my tenure as professor of theology at Texas Lutheran University and the subsequent years of my retirement. I thought that it might be an interesting exercise to provide background essays detailing the historical contexts, both personal and public, out of which each of them came. This could accomplish two purposes. First, it might render the original material more understandable and relevant to the general reader. Second, it might be of some special interest to those who deliver homilies and make other theological presentations to see explicit deliberations about the effect of context on my work as occasions for thinking about the interaction of context and content in their own.

It then occurred to me that it would make the project more interesting and helpful to involve our son, Nick. He holds degrees in English (BA), theology (MA), and marriage and family therapy (PhD). He is rostered as a Diaconal Minister by the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). Nick currently directs an ecumenical clinic that provides counseling services in a region of south central Texas east of San Antonio. Initially I asked him to write some essays responding to the material I had written. He declined due to demands on his time that included a writing project — a book — of his own. I then pointed out that he was uniquely qualified to provide some editorial assistance in the initial writing stage, giving us valuable feedback from his multi-disciplinary background. He did agree to this task.

Next, our daughter, Kim, began sharing with us a journal about her spiritual pilgrimage. Many of her insights had points of contact with my reflections — not at all, I think, rooted directly in my writing but which nonetheless took issue with or went further than some of my thoughts. Kim writes out of her experience as a computer consultant and teacher, wife and mother, a thoughtful, probing woman, and — in recent years — a social justice advocate. I asked for her participation in this project and she quickly agreed. She would write the responsive essays to my homilies, papers, and accompanying background essays.

Finally, Betty's role would be to provide a Foreword and an Afterword. She thus gets the first and last words, sharing reflections as the wife and mother of the book's co-authors. Betty writes on a rich tapestry of life woven from many years of active participation and leadership in the church (ranging from Sunday school teacher to church council member to chair of a Synod committee), from a diverse career as nurse and childbirth educator, from long participation in book club discussions and continuing education programs, and from several decades of providing the human and humane ground zero base for our family.

The first part of the title of this collection of reflections, *Un-American Activities*, comes from a US House of Representatives Committee (1938-1975) with the same name. That Committee's charter required it to investigate and rein in activities that it viewed as being counter to the interests of America. It did so, often with excessive, embarrassing, and destructive zeal.

I mean something quite different. I hold that there are some counter-cultural motifs in Christianity that imply — indeed oblige — resistance to certain ideas, values, and practices widely approved in our society. As I reviewed my work of the past quarter of a century, it became evident that this was one of the most recurrent thoughts. Kim concurs that this notion is central to her own emerging understanding of Christian life and faith. It is not, it should be noted, the only issue. But it is pervasive enough to add *Countercultural Themes in Christianity* to the title of our book. Our list of conflicts with culture, you will discover, differs markedly from lists utilized by many American Christians in recent decades.

The book's subtitle, *A modern father and a postmodern daughter reflect on their pilgrimages of life and faith*, assumes two truths about parents and adult children of today. First, often there is a profound difference in point of view between them that must be taken into account if significant communication is to take place. This entails more than the perennial generation gap. It involves a sea change in perspective from post-enlightenment modernism to postmodernism. Another *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, is sweeping western culture. I grieve a loss; my daughter celebrates a gain (see her essay in chapter 1).

Second, the chasm between modernism and postmodernism can be bridged. It does take time, honesty, and the desire to build the bridge. Both Kim and I discover that we have the desire. I have her at an advan-

tage with respect to time spent, though surely not time left. She has a long lead with respect to honesty: her essays speak of her personal odyssey in life and faith with a tone, depth, and intimacy that induce a troubled silence in me, the silence of a father's pain at a daughter's anguish.

But silence, uninterrupted silence, is not sufficient. Many adult family members find it difficult to initiate conversation about things that matter deeply, things such as faith and hope and love. We have discovered, in sharing segments of the draft manuscript with our friends and extended family and then receiving requests to use the material as discussion-starters in their own families, that this book has potential to serve as the basis — or at least a point of departure — for meaningful dialogue between adult children and their parents. We would be most pleased if it can serve that function for you.

Kim offers responses to my material, both to the recently written background essays and to the earlier homilies, papers, and articles. In general, she finds the optimism of enlightenment-generated modernism about our ability to sort things out in coherent, consistent, and encompassing rational and moral systems unwarranted and irrelevant at best, arrogant and counter-productive at worst. She shares the postmodern pessimism about such endeavors. She also clearly shares a pessimism about the growing irrelevance of much of mainstream Protestantism, which has led her to participate with passion and creativity in a contemporary protest phenomenon sometimes identified as the Emerging Church (see especially chapters 7, 12, 21, 24, and 30). What we share together is the view that there are pressing intellectual, theological, and moral issues confronting us that require responses, both theoretical and practical. This collection of writings is a montage of our efforts to meet those challenges.

You are invited to engage in these deliberations. You should know that while both Kim and Betty have had opportunities to react to my work, I have not responded to theirs. I have modified the content of neither the original homilies and papers nor the subsequent background essays as they have reacted to both. Our intent is not that we engage simply in an in-house and thereby somewhat circular dialogue, with our differences resolved and loose ends tied together. Rather, the hope is that lines of thought will lead out of our “house” — that is, outside of our small family sphere — from me to them and then to you. While Betty has the last word in our book, you should have the last word in the reflective

enterprise that the book is intended to encourage.

Each chapter of the book follows the same format. First, I provide a background essay to a particular homily, paper, or article, detailing in an autobiographical fashion its personal and public contexts. Second, I share that homily, paper or article. These appear, chapter by chapter in chronological order, dating from 1983 to 2007. Third, Kim presents a response.

Let me make some general observations about my contributions to this volume. For Christian pastors and theologians, communication with an audience or a readership involves constant interaction between content and context. The messages to be proclaimed or taught (content) have often been embedded in cultures distant in both space and time (context). Those messages must be understood in their originating contexts and then retrieved. Biblical scholars call this work *exegesis*, which means leading or reading *out of* texts the meanings in their originating contexts. The opposite of exegesis, and much more easily done, is called *eisegesis*: reading *into* biblical or other historical texts the messages that we want to find there. Even assuming, however, that proper exegesis has been done, to stop at this point would render sermons (in this book more typically called homilies) little more than exercises in data-sharing about matters of historical interest.

Therefore, the messages must be recontextualized into present-day times and places. We call this hermeneutics, or interpretation. The preacher serves much the same function as Hermes, messenger from the gods to humans in Greek mythology, but without the advantage that Hermes had of being one of the gods himself. The whole procedure, exegesis and hermeneutics, is complicated by the fact that the exegete/interpreter operates out of a context not only remote from the originating cultures of the biblical material but also at least somewhat different than the micro- or personal cultures of the people in the target audience. It is thus difficult and at times daunting work.

There are, to be sure, different methods for accomplishing these goals. I begin with the approach of modern critical biblical and historical scholarship. I have engaged in this type of analytical study for half a century. Modern critical scholars assume that both the author (including the input of oral storytellers, writers, and editors in the case of much of the biblical literature) and the reader play key roles in determining a text's meaning and purpose, with the author's function at least as important if

not even more significant than that of the reader. The contributions of historical criticism come mainly in the area of exegesis — that is, in the attempt to understand texts as they developed in their originating contexts. In my hermeneutics — that is, my efforts to render the messages retrieved by exegesis relevant in the contemporary world — I have been especially influenced by two relatively recent phenomena called liberation theology (with its focus on this world, not the next) and process theology (with its emphasis on change, not permanence), influences that will become more evident as this book unfolds.

There are many variations of the modern critical approach to the Bible, but there are also many other approaches. I will mention just two: postmodernism and fundamentalism. Starting from quite different premises, postmodern scholars claim that, because language is so inherently unstable and shifting, the reader rather than the author plays the central role in determining a text's significance. Postmodernism's way of analyzing literature is commonly called *deconstruction*: breaking down texts into component parts. Those parts — when shorn of their traditional biases, assumptions, and ideologies — are not perceived to be sources for timeless truths or universal values. Rather, the smaller components are understood to convey individual chunks of human experience. The primary or even the sole concern of the deconstructionist is to determine the current relevance of those text-borne experiences. The focus is thus on interpretation, on discerning the sense and practical implications of literature within contemporary contexts, and not on exegesis.

There is also the approach of fundamentalism, specifically biblical fundamentalism. Biblical fundamentalists subscribe to a theory of verbal inspiration of the biblical literature, to a corollary of verbal inerrancy of the Bible, and thereby to the importance of not going beyond a literal understanding of the divinely inspired biblical texts. They hold that the original writers did not leave their own imprints on the literature; nor, they argue, should contemporary readers.

Different assumptions lead not only to different approaches but also to different constraints. Fundamentalists, in embracing literalism, admit to little if any subjectivity in working with texts (see comments on my past link with biblical fundamentalism in chapter 7). Postmodernists, in embracing deconstructionism, consider little if any objectivity to be possible (see Kim's remarks about the interpretation of scripture in her essay

in chapter 24). Modernists, in embracing historical criticism, bring as much objectivity as they can muster to the task of exegesis, yet all the while acknowledging that they also bring a subjectivity conditioned by history to every text. Modernists then exercise a less restrained subjectivity in the task of interpretation, in applying the messages discovered through exegesis to current personal and social realities. They do, however, seek some objectivity in analyzing and understanding those realities — using in particular the social sciences toward those ends.

I belong to that group of modernists who believe that the breath of God, that is, the Holy Spirit, infuses the whole process — authoring and editing the literature originally, canonizing certain texts as authoritative for the life and faith of the community, transmitting those texts over the centuries, and reading them today — yet without destroying the human marks on that process. As a Christian modernist, I have more latitude in dealing with biblical material than Christian fundamentalists but less than Christian postmodernists.

I make no claim to have mastered the modern approach to texts. The results in this volume will make that abundantly clear. What I hope to do is to make the preacher's and scholar's history and experience — that is, their historically-conditioned subjectivity — more transparent as factors in the final outcome of such an approach. Each of the largely autobiographical background essays attempts to give context helpful for understanding references, perceptions, and perspectives in the homily, paper, or article that follows it. Perhaps the reader will find it a useful exercise in self-understanding as he or she follows my attempt to sort out the process by which an author produces a theological product, not in an abstract theoretical manner but in a concrete autobiographical way.

It turns out that modern theologians and scientists share a common operational effort: approximation. Modern scientists seek to approximate truth about the world by a method called experimental. The method of modern biblical scholars and historical theologians, briefly depicted above, differs but the goal is similar: an approximation of truth, in this case the truth of formative and normative documents for the Christian community such as the Bible, creeds, and confessions of faith. The pastor is the most significant practitioner of approximating and then sharing this truth when engaged in the activities called *homiletics* (preaching) and *catechetics* (teaching).

My own output of homilies, papers, and articles is far less than that of most pastors and professors. I stand in considerable awe of those preachers who, week in and week out, fulfill their obligation of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). And I have enormous admiration for those teaching colleagues who, over the years, found the time and energy to write far more articles and give far more papers than I did. On the other hand, my paucity of product will make this book a shorter and less expensive read.

We offer it to pastors, teachers, seminarians, and other students as an encouragement for practical self-awareness. Socrates once observed that the unexamined life is not worth living. This pertains as well to faith, to the tasks of faithful proclamation and pedagogy, and to the ways of expressing love and justice in the world: they should be subject to recurring scrutiny. We also offer the book to those who neither preach nor teach as an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the challenging work of articulating the Word in the contemporary world.

At another level, this book documents some exterior and interior aspects of two different pilgrimages of life and faith. Mine has been longer in time and much longer in physical distance. It has included a series of experiences that began in Latin America in the 1980s and has continued around the globe to the present day. Kim’s consciousness of pilgrimage has emerged more recently and the odyssey itself has been much more inward, triggered by the circumstances of her life in North America — though it has taken increasingly outward expression in the past several years. We offer this record of our pilgrimages both as a foil for those who are taking and reflecting on their own journeys and as an encouragement for others to begin or, in many cases, to become more fully aware of pilgrimages they are already on.

Our writing styles are dissimilar and, although we lived in the same household for eighteen years, in many ways our lifestyles and points of view have been unlike. Yet it appears that, a quarter of a century later, we are now on the same page — though we still read it with quite different eyes.

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Epiphany 2009

