

An Exercise in Liberal Biblical Theology (Keynote Address)

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Résumé de l'article

This essay was presented at the “Who is my Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century” symposium hosted by the McGill School of Religious Studies in the Fall of 2022. It offers an accessible set of reflections on how a liberal biblical theology can help people connect with the content of the Bible in ways that speak to their lived experience, thereby allowing the heart of the Bible to become more familiar and more widely accessible. In modern society, where the letters G-O-D seem like antiquated fiction and where the church has often failed to adequately and meaningfully explicate the Bible in ways that people can connect with, such a sound, gracious liberal biblical theology can be a source of renewal for both Liberal Protestantism and Christian theological education. To demonstrate this I will undertake an exercise in liberal biblical theology, contrasting the traditional Trinitarian language used by G. B. Caird (1951) to explore the unity of the New Testament with more accessible theological language, language arrived at by drawing from the work of Ralph Harper, Samuel Terrien, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Fromm, Howard Thurman, and Robert Frost.

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An Exercise in Liberal Biblical Theology

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Abstract: This essay was presented at the “Who is my Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Villiage of the 21st Century” symposium hosted by the McGill School of Religious Studies in the Fall of 2022. It offers an accessible set of reflections on how a liberal biblical theology can help people connect with the content of the Bible in ways that speak to their lived experience, thereby allowing the heart of the Bible to become more familiar and more widely accessible. In modern society, where the letters G-O-D seem like antiquated fiction and where the church has often failed to adequately and meaningfully explicate the Bible in ways that people can connect with, such a sound, gracious liberal biblical theology can be a source of renewal for both Liberal Protestantism and Christian theological education. To demonstrate this I will undertake an exercise in liberal biblical theology, contrasting the traditional Trinitarian language used by G. B. Caird (1951) to explore the unity of the New Testament with more accessible theological language, language arrived at by drawing from the work of Ralph Harper, Samuel Terrien, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Fromm, Howard Thurman, and Robert Frost.

Keywords: liberal theology, biblical theology, G. B. Caird, theology of presence

My intention, for these fifty minutes and six thousand words, is to engage us in an exercise in liberal biblical theology, which may serve into the future as an example for such conversation among neighbors within and alongside the global church, as we ponder theological education for the twenty-first century. The objective of this paper is to offer a predominantly Christian learned audience interested in pastoral education and/or vocation a vision of what this author perceives as a potential path forward for theological education in a growing, diverse context. A path that I believe, with my many years as both an academic and pastor, needs to include as its subject the biblical text and how we can offer better access to that said text to both those who teach and are taught the vocation of theology. The exercise also intentionally carries some personal memoir conjured in connection with a return, after many years, to these hallowed halls, laden as they are with both clear and murky chords of memory.¹

1. My wife and I were honoured and pleased to be included in McGill University’s fine symposium. It was a homecoming of sorts for us, this return to life along University Street in Montreal after the better part of forty years. We extend our thanks and sincere gratitude to all who have made the trip possible. For their hospitality and assistance, the author would like to thank Dr. Amanda Rosini, coeditor of the *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion*; Professor Dr. Patricia Kirkpatrick, a colleague and friend over the four decades since her memorable arrival at McGill in the mid-1980s, who brought the warmth of invitation during the cold of Covid, and kept the trip alive in the imagination over many months, and over against the prevailing wind of Covid protocols; and Professor Director Dr. Garth Green, a friend since 2006 and former colleague at Boston University, and his wonderful family, all of whom have a glad place in our happy memories of earlier work done in, as John C. Bossidy once described Boston, the “home of the bean and the cod” (“An Immortal Poem,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1923). Dr. Green was a sometime teacher of our son Benjamin before Ben shifted from pastoral to legal education (not to say, from grace to law). Of reading law and reading theology, Ben said: “The legal material is pretty straightforward, but they are very harsh in the teaching of it; theology is completely inscrutable, but they are very kind in the teaching of it.” In his own reading

For some years, I drove several times a week across the border from northern New York to Canada (“down into Canada,” as we put it). Every day the same questions were posed at the border: What is your name? Where are you from? Where are you headed? Do you have anything to declare? These are existential questions of identity, history, mystery, and adaptability. These same questions meet us when we cross the border into what James Smart called “the strange silence of the Bible in the church.”²

John Wesley wanted to become *homo unius libri* (a person of one book, which is to say, the Bible).³ But in our time, it might be said that while we have known bits and parts – parables and commandments, say – of the Holy Scripture, we may not have had enough opportunity or encouragement to ask big, broad questions of the Bible. Upon those questions, in the end, depends on any interpretation of the Bible’s various parts, and upon them, in the end, any community – in the sense of love of neighbour – also depends.

What, if anything, holds the Bible together? How did this remarkably diverse collection emerge into a rough and ready unity? How do we think about the Divine Presence – the elusive presence expressed in the Holy Scripture, and found there by centuries of readers well before us? What does such presence mean to us? How do we adapt its wonders to the actual daily experience of life in community, of struggle in faith, of prayer and song?

Identity. History. Mystery. Adaptability. We may not have done, over the last two generations, what we could and should have done with some of the big questions concerning the Bible, its views of life and its theology, even its liberal theology. Or, to put it another way: what we *have* done has perhaps been limited, by means of language and conversation, mostly to academics (like me) who live at a bit of distance from life and church, from challenge and choice. In this morning hour, with a little help from some friends and more than a little help from the prayers, good questions, and responses from a respondent audience (you all), we will try to engage in a lively and accessible exercise in liberal biblical theology. Our desired outcome is this: that the heart of the Bible might become more familiar, more accessible, and more graspable, and therefore, we trust, more *helpful* to us day by day in our walk of faith and in our love of neighbour. For each of us, like Mr. Wesley, harbour a desire to become *homo unius libri*.

The drives “down into Canada” I mentioned a moment ago were a consequence of travelling many days each week between our small country parsonage in New York State and McGill University in Montreal, where I studied Coptic texts for my doctoral work in New Testament studies. I never completely lost my sense of apprehension, even dread, at the existential questions posed to me at the border; nor did I lose my awareness of the weather, which practiced its own form of existential questioning. I twice put the car into snowbanks, once on each side of the border. As I crossed the Saint Lawrence into Montreal by way of the Mercier Bridge, I would see bumper stickers that read, if memory serves: *Priez pour moi, je conduis sur le pont Mercier* (pray for me as I am driving on the Mercier Bridge).

One very cold morning near five a.m., while driving in the dark beyond Huntingdon, Quebec, I stopped in the snow alongside a lost trucker. I lowered the window to catch his question: “*Où est la frontière?*” When I had finally translated to myself the simple sentence “Where is the border,” I leaned back and haltingly replied in French; but before I could say much, he caught my accent (or maybe, instead,

of theology, Garth keeps alive that balance between the straightforward and the inscrutable. To the audience originally present for this lecture, who gave of their time that we might learn together, and to McGill University, which granted me a Ph.D. in 1991 after a decade of travel and study, and which now has given me the further honour of this lecture opportunity, this remembrance of things past: thank you.

2. James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

3. John Wesley, *Wesley's Standard Sermons: Consisting of Forty-Four Discourses, Published in Four Volumes*, ed. Edward H. Sugden, 6th an. ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 32.

he caught my abysmal grammar). Jumping for joy, he said, “Buddy, you speak English! You must be American.” And I could say to him, in the language that we shared, “You are not far, not at all far from the border.”

We feel a surprising, joyful anticipation as we approach the border in faith. In some ways, every soulful reading of Scripture, whether public or private, is such an approach. In use at the border is the same language we have used for a lifetime: the language of grace. We cross the same border with every confession of sin and every acceptance of pardon. We cross the same border with every awareness of idolatry and every word of forgiveness. We have crossed over before in the daylight so that when night falls, we need not fear. We know what the psalmist meant by the words, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5; NRSV).

“The New Testament View of Life”

On a winter day, I found myself on the wrong floor of the library in the Birks Building. I found myself browsing through collections of speeches that had been given at McGill. Why? I have no idea. But in that pause and perusal, all of a sudden, I came upon a collection of inaugural lectures from past decades at McGill, including one lecture by G. B. Caird that I consequently photocopied. It was titled “The New Testament View of Life.”⁴

In 1951, Caird set out to do a portion of what we are trying to do this morning: to consider some comprehensive questions about the Bible, to gain a foothold, to make an overture to biblical theology. With courage, he assayed to raise and answer the question of the identity of the New Testament. What is it about? Not in a thousand pages, but in a few – what is the New Testament about? What is its view of life? Caird wrote:

Literary and historical criticism, then, have made and are still making contributions to our understanding of the New Testament on which there is no going back. Yet the violent reaction with which these contributions were at first repudiated, and in some circles are still repudiated today, sprang from a sound if unenlightened instinct. Christian faith has always been nourished upon the word of Scripture, and could not indefinitely be satisfied with the *dissecta membra* of analytical scholarship. Sooner or later the demand was bound to be made for a new movement which should rediscover beneath the diversity the fundamental unity of the New Testament, which can be felt even by those who are unable to prove its existence. The prophet of the new movement was C. H. Dodd, who in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1936 declared that the present task in New Testament studies was synthesis.⁵

Let me ask you something this morning, speaking neighbour to neighbour: Are we at a similar crossroads today in the study, in the reading, in the interpretation of the Bible? Have we, at least in some measure, invested such attention in the diversity and variety of the Scripture that we have left behind the marrow, the meaning, the heart, the theology of the whole? Caird wrote, seventy years ago:

The challenge of comparative religion has been honestly faced by Christian scholars, and in the long run it has served to confirm rather than to shake their confidence in the unique quality of their Scriptures. This confidence has been shown of late in a spate of books and articles whose purpose is to show how, without in any way sacrificing the gains of a century of criticism, we can still regard the Bible as the Word of God – a

4. G. B. Caird, “The New Testament View of Life” (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1951).

5. Caird, 7.

word communicated not by the automatic processes of verbal inspiration, but through the fallible powers and kaleidoscopic variety of human thought and speech, yet a word unique in its authority and appeal.⁶

Pause for a moment and savour Caird's language and imagery, his gracious rhetoric. Notice the words: unique. . . Word. . . kaleidoscopic variety. . . authority. . . appeal.

As we do, as we want to do, as we must do, we honour and with humility attend to the 250 years (and more, now) of historical, critical, and other study of the Holy Scripture. Not to do so would be to deny the truth hard found, hard won, hard edged, of the historical study of Scripture, including its younger grandchildren and cousins now turning toward further varieties of lenses and modes of interpretation. Confronted with the possible dangers posed by such a conflagration, such a fire of investigation, Rudolf Bultmann wrote: "I calmly let the fire burn."⁷ But at some point, there also arises – in fact, there arises as a consequence of all this labour – the abiding question of what it all means in a communicable, communal, contextual sense. Caird continues:

In the present state of New Testament studies, then, there is a growing disposition to emphasize both the unity and the uniqueness of the New Testament writings, though neither unity nor uniqueness can as yet be taken for granted. I propose, therefore, to set before you in three illustrations a view of life which seems to me to be common to all the richly varied writings of the New Testament and to be the peculiar contribution of those writings to the religious thought of mankind.⁸

So again let me ask you, speaking neighbour to neighbour: Are we at a similar crossroads today in the study, in the reading, in the interpretation of the Bible?

The Bible is not going anywhere; it is certainly not going away, particularly not from the global mission, work, life, and struggle of the church. This question of interpretation has become, for me, a deeply personal one. Within my beloved denomination, the United Methodist Church, our national and global inattention to a liberal biblical theology has contributed to a sorrowful, costly, and painful impasse and partial collapse.

So in these following three exercises (from a pastoral perspective), I first review Caird's own exploration of biblical theology from 1951 and then, hopefully in an accessible way, I enter the conversation here in 2022. I part company with Caird on many points, but I will honour his brief, at least in a slight and formal way, by borrowing his threefold outline for our exercise this morning.

His threefold outline, rephrased, is this: the New Testament presents a view of life that includes and celebrates *presence* – the presence of God, of the divine spirit in history, human history; a view of life that includes and celebrates the crucial *freedom* of the human being – sinners and saints and all in between; and a view of life that includes and celebrates that which we can learn in and through our own *experience*. Presence, freedom, and experience – these are unifying aspects of the New Testament fore and aft, across all its twenty-seven books, its manifold and maddening varieties, its contrary diversities, and its opaque and yet-not-fully mastered conundrums.

Let us, for a moment this morning, explore along these three paths in the exercise of a liberal biblical theology. We shall in each case begin with Caird, and then, in what Paul called "the partnership of

6. Caird, 8.

7. Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969), 132.

8. Caird, "New Testament View," 8.

the gospel” (Phil. 1:5; ESV), continue and advance with one or more partner voices (Ralph Harper, Samuel Terrien, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Fromm, Howard Thurman, Robert Frost, and others).

Caird grounded his work in the Trinity, in traditional Trinitarian language, as he took up his work on the unity of the New Testament. In some dissonance with what Caird wrote seventy years ago, I would like to use some more secular theological language to approach the biblical neighbour and neighbourhood, especially and intentionally as we consider Christian theological education in the twenty-first century.

Caird wrote, as was read on the wrong floor of the library long ago, that the belief offered us by the New Testament “is a belief in God the Creator whose gracious favour embraces without respect of persons all the creatures of his handiwork. It is a belief in God the Redeemer who can turn darkness into light and whose reign is a saving reign. It is a belief in God the Spirit, through whose unremitting activity the reign of God is transmuted from an article of faith into a fact of experience.”⁹ Put simply, it is the witness to belief in God – the witness to God – that gives the Bible in general its unity in the face of diversity.

Yet for some, perhaps for you, the three letters G-O-D may be more fence than doorway. Not only does the agnostic and the apophatic but also, and more so, the average person – the “reasonable man” of insurance law – often stumble on those three letters. As the adage goes: “If God is God, he is not good, and if God is good, he is not God.”¹⁰ That is, it is hard to square concentric circles of love and power, of power and love.

This spring, ten thousand innocent civilians were slaughtered in Mariupol alone.¹¹ We are attuned to such suffering in part, let us confess because those who died lived in homes like those we live in. They shopped in stores resembling our own. They used social media and the internet, as do you. They rode transit, owned cars, vacationed in Barcelona, spoke multiple languages, and tragically became party to a new or renewed Russian appetite for slaughter. If God could stop that and didn’t, he is not good. If God would stop it and couldn’t, he is not God. For some, hence, the three letters G-O-D are more fence than doorway.

Nor does it help that our halting, partial overtures to a sound, liberal, biblical theology have sometimes shorn us, the people of faith, of our vocabulary. Sin? We hardly name it. Death? We rarely face it. The daily threat of meaninglessness? We barely conceive it. And then, in the democracy just south of here, along comes a six-year political crisis, including January 6th.¹² And then along comes a two- or three-year hibernation in the Covid cave. And then along comes the invasion of Ukraine, with a whiff of nuclear bombast – nuclear bomb blast – in the air. Creation can be seen; salvation can be felt. But fall? The fallenness of creation? The abject, dire need, one beggar telling another where both can find bread, the impossible possibility of fallenness? We were absent that day, or we took another course – not that there is any. Or, we thought, we had bigger fish to fry – not that there are any. In these times, we can see the need for a sound, gracious, liberal biblical theology. Sin is the absence of God. Death is the absence of God. Meaninglessness is the absence of God. But you, it may well be, are not at ease with those three letters, G-O-D. They seem a fancy, a fiction, an antique mistake.

Sometimes they seem so to me, too – though, in fact and in full, I hold fast to the ancient traditions and language. Sometimes they seem so to me, given our current cultural, linguistic incapacity for – our cultural, linguistic exclusion of – the three letters G-O-D. The Scriptures offer, however, a gift, a saving

9. Caird, “New Testament View,” 11.

10. Archibald MacLeish, “‘J. B.’: A Play in Verse” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 11.

11. Yuras Karmanau, Adam Schreck, and Cara Anna, “More than 10,000 killed in Mariupol,” *Toronto Star*, April 12, 2022, Factiva. The Russian Federation began an armed conflict with Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Reports concerning the number of civilian casualties were highly varied.

12. In reference to the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States capitol.

one: another three words that mean G-O-D but that may better say so, at least for some, for a time, in our time. *Presence* and *freedom* and *experience*. A back porch entry, not a front porch one. Today you may find wonder, marvel, and amazement. . . just here.

Now let me turn from “God the Creator” to the simpler, yet fully biblical, word “presence,” from Caird to Harper.

Presence

One summer some years ago, our family went on a three-day trip to Maine. We stopped in Kennebunkport and swam in the ocean. That day the newspaper carried a review of a short book called *On Presence*.¹³ The book had been written by Ralph Harper, a then unknown Episcopal priest in Maryland, and it had won a prestigious prize. I remember feeling struck by Harper’s reflection on the difficulty of writing honestly after preaching nearly every Sunday for more than two decades, as he had. I stuffed the review in my shirt pocket and bought the book (albeit nine months later). The book is about presence, the sense of presence, and the practice of the presence of God. It is about being amazed.

Harper wrote: “We have too short a time on this earth to pass up any chance to find words and images to live by. I believe almost everyone is capable of being moved by some person, place, nature, or individual work of art. Of course, there is instability and incoherence in and about us all the time. There is also an inexhaustible store of Being to keep us permanently in awe.”¹⁴

He went on: “Not everything can be said easily, except claims of absolute affirmation or denial. In time most things can be said clearly, at least. And some of these things are so important that we should do everything we can to make them clear. Presence is one of these things. It is not a word that we should allow anyone to rule out of our vocabulary and discourse.”¹⁵

Here is a footnote to a sense of presence. At Union Theological Seminary, Samuel Terrien (whose widow, Sarah, graciously phoned me during my first autumn in Boston) taught us, in melodious prose, that “in biblical faith, presence eludes, but does not delude.”¹⁶ Terrien wrote: “God is near, but his presence remains elusive,”¹⁷ the elusive presence of a walking, not a sitting, God;¹⁸ a God of tent, not temple;¹⁹ of ear, not eye;²⁰ of name, not glory;²¹ a God of time, not space;²² of grace, not place, in whom does our faith allow us to translate love for God into actual behaviour in society.²³ “Presence does not alter nature but it changes history through the character of [human beings].”²⁴

13. Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

14. Harper, viii.

15. Harper, 119.

16. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 476.

17. Terrien, 170.

18. Terrien, 170–171.

19. Terrien, 179.

20. Terrien, 112; 201.

21. Terrien, 138.

22. Terrien, 186.

23. Terrien, 201.

24. Terrien, 235.

Freedom

Caird, in his essay, looked hard at the matter of redemption, of God as Redeemer. This is the gospel of the God who is loving us into love and freeing us into freedom, the God whose love gives us freedom and makes a way for freedom. Caird wrote:

Still more important is the answer which the New Testament gives to the problem of evil. To the academic question, “What is the origin of evil?” the New Testament indeed neither gives nor attempts to give an answer: nor do I believe that any consistent theory can be propounded by the finite mind of man which will not do violence to some of the facts of experience. But to the practical questions, “Why does not God do something about evil?” and “What can we do about the evil that confronts us?” the New Testament has a fully satisfying reply. God has done something. His kingdom of righteousness has broken in upon the kingdom of Satan to set free those who were held in bondage to evil habits and evil institutions. “If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then without doubt the kingdom of God has come upon you.” He has “called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” In the decisive battle of Calvary the serried ranks of evil have been defeated by Jesus’ calm obedience to the will of God, and men may now join him in the victorious campaign in which every enemy is to be put under his feet. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory!”²⁵

Now let me turn from “God the Redeemer” to the different, yet fully biblical, word “freedom,” from Caird to Bonhoeffer (and a few of his cousins).

During my first year of study at Union Theological Seminary, I lived on the second floor of Hastings Hall in the room that had, decades earlier, been inhabited by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1934, Bonhoeffer declared that “the church that calls a people to belief in Christ must itself be, in the midst of that people, the burning fire of love, the nucleus of reconciliation, the source of the fire in which all hate is smothered and proud, hateful people are transformed into loving people.”²⁶

Bonhoeffer joins some of the greatest voices in our tradition in steadily connecting redemption and freedom, in ways that fill out the meaning of both. “To act out of concrete responsibility,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “means to act in *freedom* – to decide, to act, and to answer for the consequences of this particular action *myself* without the support of other people or principles. Responsibility presupposes ultimate freedom in assessing a given situation, in choosing, and in acting.”²⁷ Then: “Precisely because we are dealing with a deed that arises from freedom, the one who acts is not torn apart by destructive conflict, but instead can with confidence and inner integrity do the unspeakable, namely, in the very act of breaking the law to sanctify it.”²⁸

Paul Tillich emphasized the power of participation, and with it freedom, in discussions about the truth of faith – free participation in the experience of faith, in the community of faith.²⁹ Others have made similar or related claims, claims that render redemption in the language of freedom.

25. Caird, “New Testament View,” 10.

26. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 13: *London: 1933–1935*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best, vol. 13 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 392.

27. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 221 (emphasis in the original).

28. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 297.

29. See, for example, Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3: *Life and the Spirit; History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 129–138; 231–245.

In such freedom did Dr. Douglas John Hall, our esteemed, beloved teacher here at McGill and a one-time student of Tillich, impress upon me that ours is a religion that must share spiritual nurture of the world with many other faith traditions.

In such freedom did Bishop Michael Curry say, during the upheaval within the Episcopal Church that followed Gene Robinson's election to the office of bishop:

I noticed something. While some people were upset and expressing that, the majority were supportive or politely silent. There is very often a sensible center, a silent or quiet majority who are being drowned out by the loudest, most extreme voices. But they are there. Many are simply waiting for the angry to exhaust themselves. They listen patiently, waiting for a deeper wisdom to emerge. Something else happened with some regularity. Quietly a parent would whisper in my ear, "Thank you." They would tell me that their son or daughter, niece or nephew, was gay. This happened regularly.³⁰

In such freedom did our colleague Dr. Ibram X Kendi say, in a lecture recently given at Boston University: "Racist power is not godly. Racist policies are not indestructible. Racial inequities are not inevitable. Racist ideas are not natural to the human mind. . . Once we lose hope, we are guaranteed to lose."³¹

Here is a footnote to a sense of freedom. Erich Fromm warned us about the dread of freedom; he traced the effects on freedom that result from the lack of hope; he pointed to the daily effects of such. Ultimately, Fromm offered a clear, divine word of hope, both in and for freedom: "*Positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality*,"³² he wrote. "*There is only one meaning of life: the act of living itself*."³³ "By one course [one] can progress to 'positive freedom'; [one] can relate [oneself] spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of [one's] emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities; [one] can thus become one again with man, nature, and himself, without giving up the independence and integrity of [one's] individual self."³⁴

Spontaneity! Comradery! Emotion! Intellect! Where you come alongside these, according to Fromm's work, there, we might say, is freedom.

Experience

Experience, Caird reminded us, is the foundation for our beliefs, for our actions, for our very personhood. "Christians were united in a common experience before ever they agreed to explain that experience in a common doctrine," he wrote. "The whole Christian movement began with something that happened to a small group of men and women, and it continued and grew because by their testimony they were able to share with others their experience."³⁵

In speaking broadly of God the Sustainer, Caird gave us a framework for our engagement in the experiences of this world:

30. Michael B. Curry and Sara Grace, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Avery, 2020), 180–181.

31. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 238.

32. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1941), 258 (italics in the original).

33. Fromm, 263 (italics in the original).

34. Fromm, 140.

35. Caird, "New Testament View," 13.

The Christian who knows and practices the New Testament faith regards the world not as a vale of tears or as a house of correction, but as a fit setting for a life of heavenly citizenship. He engages in good works and social reforms, not because he has an illusory belief in progress, but because love to one's neighbor is the law of the city to which he belongs. Yet he escapes the lures of materialism and worldliness through the knowledge that his ultimate allegiance is to a city whose builder and maker is God.³⁶

Interpreted through such a frame, events of an individual past reveal meaning and fold into the conscious past of our community and of humankind. The study of theology can aid our understanding of, though never substitute for, lived experience. "To study the theological terminology of the New Testament is to see the new wine of experience burst one after another of the old bottles of language and thought. And it is no criticism of St. Paul as a theologian if we say that he touches the deepest springs of our spiritual life when the theologian yields to the poet,"³⁷ Caird wrote. "The science of theology must be subservient to the practice of Christian living."³⁸

Invoking the metaphor offered by Hebrews 12:1, Caird reminded us that our single thread of experience will weave into a greater tapestry. "The saints of the past have run their lap and carried the baton of faith successfully to the end of the course. Now they throng the seats of the stadium to watch a new generation run in its turn. . . Perfection is a social achievement, and only in the corporate perfection of the new society of God's kingdom can a man find his own subordinate perfection."³⁹ Still later, Caird continued:

To the *fatalism* of those who see the world hustled by a blind impulse to an unknown destiny the New Testament proclaims that behind the manifold workings of the mysterious universe there is a personal and purposing power; to the *loneliness* of those whom the friendship of this world has failed to satisfy, it offers the fellowship of a new society; to the *optimism* which still hopes to build utopia by social reform it declares that that society is already in being; to the *materialism* which has submitted to the facile attractions of worldly security and comfort it asserts that the kingdom is not of this world; to the *rationalism* which demands logical proof it responds with the testimony of personal experience; and to the *pessimism* which is overwhelmed by the burden of the world's shame and sorrow it gives the assurance that the Lord God omnipotent reigns.⁴⁰

When thinking of experience, take my beloved predecessor as Dean of Marsh Chapel, Howard Thurman – a poetic theologian, and a theological poet, one who celebrated experience. He was a hundred years ahead of his time when he sat at my own desk (from 1953 to 1965), so he is still fifty years ahead of me! As Thurman would emphasize, our experience teaches us. He recalled late-night walks along his beloved Daytona Beach, alone and with his feet in the sand: "The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behaviour of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace."⁴¹

It happened that, this spring at Boston University, a wonderful, beloved, seventy-five-year-old professor died in mid-lecture. Later, the fifteen students from the class were gathered. After initial

36. Caird, 12.

37. Caird, 13.

38. Caird, 14.

39. Caird, 13.

40. Caird, 14 (all emphasis mine).

41. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979), 8.

awkwardness, they began to speak, and a full *presence* filled the room. One spoke a soliloquy on trauma and grief. One gave a soliloquy on connection in hardship. One spoke a soliloquy on pride and love. One gave a soliloquy on how others – the professor’s faculty friends, who had known him so much longer – might be hurting so much more. Then, a moment: “Let’s go visit them and offer our condolences,” one said. And they did. It was a powerful, poetic moment – an experience. Where did we ever get the idea that twenty-year-olds cannot say and do great things?

Dean Thurman was a lover of the Psalms. Presence, his sense of presence, his practice of presence, his experience of presence, intimate to the natural world, led him to such love. To know Howard Thurman was to share his experience in worship, sacrament, prayer, singing, spirituals, preaching – and in religion. He had a favourite Psalm or two; perhaps you do as well. Pick two and learn them by heart this year. Maybe this week, you will read one in this setting, this beautiful chapel at McGill University; maybe you will, like so many others have in this place, find, and be found by, presence.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
(Ps. 139:7–12; NRSV)

For Howard Thurman, presence – the experience of presence – is a central word for God. Here we find another back porch entry, instead of a front porch one. Like Thurman, and like the psalmist held fast even in the dark of night, you may find wonder, marvel, and amazement in presence. For, as we have learned, “in thy presence is fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:1; KJV).

Here is a footnote to a sense of experience. The New England poet Robert Frost beautifully honoured our experience in so many of his dark, dour poems, including (speaking of crossing the border) this famous one set against the border:

To Time it never seems that he is brave
To set himself against the peaks of snow
To lay them level with the running wave,
Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low,
But only grave, contemplative and grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
Then eddies playing round a sunken reef

Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
At such a planetary change of style.

I could give all to Time except – except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept.⁴²

Frost's own engagement with the Christian tradition is itself a complex story that would take us several hours of labour to unwind. But with these words, he came quite close to the emphasis on experience that is a hallmark of centrality, of unity in diversity, within the fullness of the Scripture.

Coda

I am grateful to have had your attention over these past fifty minutes and six thousand words, during which my intention has been to engage us in an exercise in liberal biblical theology that may serve in the future as an example for such conversation among neighbours within and alongside the global church. Our exercise, toward which leans the partnership of the Gospel, may be found in both academic and religious reflection on these cognates to the divine: *presence, freedom, and experience*. Are there other such cognates? For sure. Start your list. Yet when we are in Scripture, are we ever very far from presence (or its shadow in absence), from freedom (or its shadow in bondage), or from experience (or its shadow in loneliness)? I think not.

For those who may, rightly, think that I have spoken for a long time without quoting much Scripture, here are some Scriptural signposts toward presence, freedom and experience found in the letter to the Galatians:

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19–20; NRSV). *Presence: I live by.*

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1; NRSV). *Freedom: set free.*

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal 5:22–23; NRSV). *Experience: fruit.*

Some friendly theological signposts on the road toward liberal biblical theology include the following, from James Sanders and John Collins. Said Sanders: “[Scriptural canon] functions, for the most part, to provide indications of the identity as well as the life-style of the on-going community which reads

42. Robert Frost, “I Could Give All to Time,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 334–335.

it.”⁴³ “The primary characteristic of canon [...] is its adaptability.”⁴⁴ “Adaptability and stability. That is canon. Each generation reads its authoritative tradition in the light of its own place in life, its own questions, and its own necessary hermeneutics. This is inevitable. Around this core were gathered many other materials, as time went on, adaptable to it.”⁴⁵

Said John J. Collins: “Whether or not one can conceive of a biblical theology grounded in historical criticism obviously depends on whether one insists on a faith commitment that exempts some positions from criticism, or whether one is willing to regard biblical theology as an extension of the critical enterprise that deals with truth-claims and values in an open-ended engagement with the text.”⁴⁶ Later: “The discovery of structural unity in a tradition that spans a millennium has also proven endlessly problematic from a historical point of view.”⁴⁷

Says Robert Allan Hill: I am a Liberal – in theology, Paul Tillich; in philosophy, Isaiah Berlin; in culture, Marilyn Robinson; in economics, Paul Krugman; in politics, Barack Obama. I am Liberal, not orthodox, fundamentalist, conservative, or traditionalist; but I am also Liberal, not progressivist, successivist, anarchist, liberationist, or Marxist.

Finally, by way of encouragement, Pasternak always ended with Shakespeare’s 66th Sonnet, so we shall, too.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
 As, to behold desert a beggar born,
 And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
 And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
 And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
 And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
 And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
 And strength by limping sway disabled,
 And art made tongue-tied by authority,
 And folly doctor-like controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill:
 Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
 Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.⁴⁸

43. J. A. Sanders, “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon,” in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 537.

44. Sanders, 539.

45. Sanders, 551.

46. John J. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 3.

47. Collins, 13.

48. William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 66,” in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. G. C. Clark and W. A. Wright (United Kingdom: Parragon Publishing, 2000), 1036.

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