



The Journey from 1968 to 2018

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Significant changes occurred in and around 1968. The purpose of this essay is to examine their consequences. What do they mean for the church and for theology today?¹

FROM NEOORTHODOXY TO DIVERSITY

I graduated from Luther Seminary in 1966. My recollection is that the contemporary outlook to which we were exposed was coherently neoorthodox. By no means was this unique. For two or three decades, neoorthodoxy had been the dominant outlook in mainstream theology.

Neoorthodoxy was “neo” in that it abandoned the literalistic interpretation of the Bible found in the Protestant orthodoxy of the 1600s. It was “orthodox” in its emphasis on the word of God and the priority of proclamation. A good deal of attention was given to the “Christ of faith,” to justification by grace, and to existential faith. For shorthand, these can be called “second-article concerns.”

¹As an essay, this article offers suggestions rather than provides definitive answers. Given its brevity and the breadth of its topic, generalizations and oversimplifications are unavoidable. Hence, many of the assertions deserve more discussion than is possible here.

In 1968, Christian theology in North America was on the cusp of change. The dominance of the older, neoorthodox theologians was coming to an end, and newer forms of theology were on the ascendance, urging a more direct Christian involvement in society and creation.

Neoorthodoxy had roots (largely obscured by Barth's description of nineteenth-century theology) in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89).² Ritschl was concerned about how the understanding of nature as a gigantic machine threatened the distinctiveness of humans. And he was concerned about industrialization, which tended to make workers into cogs in a socioeconomic machine. So he emphasized the special place given to humans in the Scriptures. He thought religion supported their freedom, creativity, and spiritual worth. Neoorthodoxy also had roots in Søren Kierkegaard's emphasis on the intensity of existential faith and a "wholly other" God. These nineteenth-century roots kept the focus of neoorthodoxy clearly on Christ and on the human—on a person's standing before God and on a person's freedom and courage in the face of surrounding threats to one's humanity.

The context in which this approach emerged was World War I and the disillusionment resulting from it. Civilization as it had been practiced in Europe seemed to be coming apart. Some source of internal strength was needed. And in the face of fascism and Stalinist communism, the same need became urgent in a somewhat different way. For the neoorthodox theologians, such internal strength was to be found in the proclaimed word of God.

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By 1968, the dominance of neoorthodoxy was beginning to fade. Karl Barth died that year. Emil Brunner had died in 1966. Even though Reinhold Niebuhr lived until 1971, by 1966 he had suffered a serious stroke that curtailed his activities and largely silenced his public voice. (For a time he continued to meet graduate students in his home.) If one decides to include Paul Tillich in this school of thought, he too was gone, having died in 1965. Among the names most associated with neoorthodoxy, Bultmann was the only one to live into the mid-1970s, dying in 1976.

Not only were the leading neoorthodox theologians disappearing, but other voices were challenging their outlook. Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* had appeared in 1965 and was getting a good deal of attention in 1968. It celebrated "the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion."³ The secular city, Cox wrote, is a world in which "all supernatural myths and sacred symbols" have been broken.⁴ While agreeing with others that metaphysical language was not the medium for speaking of the biblical God, Cox also rejected historical language

² One of Ritschl's students was Wilhelm Herrmann. Both Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann were Herrmann's students.

³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1.

⁴ Cox, *Secular City*, 2.

and Bultmann's use of existential language. The proper medium was political.⁵ Cox thought we needed to discover where God is working and then join God's work. He recommended suspending talk of God until such time as a new name emerges for the God who works alongside us "in order not to confuse the One who reveals Himself in Jesus with the gods of mythology or the deity of philosophy."⁶ Thomas J. J. Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* appeared in 1966, along with his and William Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. That same year, the cover of the April 8 issue of *Time* magazine was emblazoned with the question, "Is God Dead?" Neoorthodoxy had put a good deal of emphasis on God's revelation in history. But these folks were saying that history was rendering a traditional concept of God obsolete.

And, indicative of other things to come, in 1968 Gustavo Gutiérrez spoke in Peru to the Second Meeting of Priests and Laity in a talk titled "Toward a Theology of Liberation." It outlined the ideas published five years later in *A Theology of Liberation*. Also, James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* was published in 1969. These signaled the emergence of various forms of liberation theology, each of which focused on a structural injustice in society and the resources in the Scriptures to foster social change. As Karl Barth's rejection of Nazism demonstrates, neoorthodoxy could inspire resistance to totalitarian claims. And, as is evident in Niebuhr's attention to the capacity of social structures to become self-serving, neoorthodoxy did not ignore the influence of social structures. But, when combined with its focus on second-article concerns, neoorthodoxy's worry about the human proclivity to sin and its worries about falling into "cultural Protestantism" left it ill-equipped to support social change with the intensity desired by these new voices. Liberation theologies worked to overcome this lacuna, and in so doing, reenvisioned the role of God in the world.

All of these developments received a good deal of attention, but by 1968, a relatively lone voice had already spent fourteen years calling for theological change. Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, who had been critical of neoorthodoxy's focus on God's revelation in history, was concerned about environmental degradation and was recommending that theology give attention to nature. In 1954 he wrote, "I have felt a deepening uneasiness about that tendency in biblical theology, generally known as neo-orthodoxy, whereby the promises, imperatives, and dynamics of the Gospel are declared in sharp and calculated disengagement from the stuff of earthly life. . . . There is meaning in the non-human world of nature."⁷ "Christian theology cannot advance this work along the line of an orthodoxy—neo or old—which celebrates the love of heaven in complete separation from man's loves in earth, which abstracts commitment to Christ from relevancy to those loyalties of earth that are elemental to being."⁸ In 1961, he addressed the Assembly of the World Council of Churches on the topic of being called to unity, and said,

⁵ Cox, *Secular City*, 249.

⁶ Cox, *Secular City*, 267.

⁷ Joseph Sittler, "A Theology for Earth [1954]," in *Evocations of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 24.

⁸ Sittler, "Theology for Earth," 30.

“A doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation.”⁹ In 1968 he was warning that “we [Americans] have fashioned a society and an industrial order at a cost, and the bill is due and payable. The magnificence of our endowment has been cleverly used and appallingly abused. The accumulated garbage of the achievement has befouled the air, polluted the water, [and] scarred the land.”¹⁰ If “prophetic” can be used to describe someone who anticipates a much-needed change, then surely his was a prophetic voice. His advocacy for theological attention to nature predated the emergence of the environmental movement¹¹ and predated any extensive theological attention to the topic. It signaled another path for post-1968 theology.

Liberation theologies (including black theology), discussions of the death of God, “religion-less Christianity,” the secular city, and the importance of the natural world were all perspectives that moved beyond the boundaries of neoorthodoxy.

We should add three others. Though ecumenism dates back to 1910, the first dialogue group involving the Roman Catholic Church emerged in 1965. It brought together Lutherans and Catholics. It started with a working group that met in 1966 and 1967 and led to the creation of the joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission, which began its work in 1967 and has continued to produce study documents ever since. Like the other developments mentioned above, this was a new undertaking, hardly imaginable prior to 1962. Unlike the others, this looks in retrospect more like a next step in ecumenism and more of an outgrowth of neoorthodoxy than a challenge to it. From the beginning, neoorthodoxy was not denominationally specific, drawing from the Lutheran, Calvinist, and other Christians traditions. Those Roman Catholics and others who became involved tended to approach the Bible in the same way as did neoorthodoxy, not because they had been influenced by Protestant thinking but because of the “New Theology” coming out of France. The dialogues and their written reports tended to focus on questions of doctrine, on matters more “in-house” than those that occupied the other movements that emerged post-1968. The observances associated with the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation have been a wonderful reminder of how far this interdenominational work has come. Ecumenical theology is one strand in the multiplicity of post-1968 theological perspectives.

The second addition is the theological perspective influenced by Jewish-Christian dialogue. In more recent years, Jewish-Christian dialogue has expanded to become interreligious dialogue. But this was not yet the case in 1968, so let us stick with the narrower focus. An early sign of its theological impact came in 1965 when Vatican Council II adopted the highly influential *Nostra Aetate*.¹² Within

⁹ Joseph Sittler, “Called to Unity [1962],” in *Evocations of Grace*, 40.

¹⁰ Joseph Sittler, “The Role of the Spirit in Creating the Future Environment [1968],” in *Evocations of Grace*, 74.

¹¹ Usually associated with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in the fall of 1962.

¹² For a clear and informative recounting of the effects of *Nostra Aetate* on subsequent Roman Catholic theology, see Philip A. Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

Lutheran circles, a few serious and sustained dialogues were under way by 1968. The first statement made by Lutherans in the United States that reflected these dialogues was adopted by the American Lutheran Church (the ELCA predecessor) in 1974.¹³ Once Christian participants, chastened by Nazism, had come to understand the devastating effects of anti-Judaism and supersessionism, a thorough rethinking of their self-understanding, their interpretation of the Bible, and their mischaracterizations of Judaism was necessary. Expanding Jewish-Christian dialogue to include Christian dialogue with other religions has been beneficial in many ways, but the questions it raises are often different from those that occupy Jewish-Christian dialogue. Therefore the latter cannot simply be a subset of the larger enterprise. Growing attention both to Jewish-Christian dialogue and to interreligious relations is another strand in the diversity.

The third addition is process theology. It was not new in 1968. Charles Hartsorne had been at work as one of its pioneers, but by 1968 process thinking was influencing a wider number of young theologians, largely through the teaching and writing of Daniel Day Williams, who was by then at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It was 1968 when his *Spirit and Forms of Love* was published. In 1973, John Cobb and David Griffin established the Center for Process Studies at Claremont. Though the application of Whitehead's philosophy to theology occurred over time, it became far more influential after 1968. Because its cosmological perspective moved beyond the second-article concerns of neoorthodoxy and was critical of "classical theism," it was in these ways another challenge to pre-1968 theology. Also, its allegiance to a particular philosophy distinguished it from neoorthodoxy.¹⁴ It becomes another school of thought that replaced the pre-1968 dominance of neoorthodoxy.

As time went on, the diversity increased. For example, Asian theology and African theology represented regional approaches, taking their place alongside the Gutiérrez brand of liberation theology that had its origins in South America.

The point is this: among mainline Christian groups, 1968 marked an important transition from a dominant theological paradigm to a plurality of approaches.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

How did the change in historical context affect this shift? As we will see, the international context was quite different from what was happening within this country. Internationally, the post-1968 world was a fairly orderly one. The pre-1968 experience of war and of the triumph of modernity shaped neoorthodoxy. Where could meaning be found? Where could forgiveness be found? Where could hope

¹³ See "The American Lutheran Church and the Jewish People," in *Stepping-Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relationships: Key Lutheran Statements*, ed. Harold H. Ditmanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 67-74.

¹⁴ The title "process theology" can also refer to an approach that holds similar theological ideas but is less directly dependent on Whitehead. It takes human freedom very seriously, allows for an "open" future (not completely known to God), and allows for changes in God as well as an unchanging divine purpose.

be found? Post-1968, the Cold War so organized the world that, from the perspective of where most Christians lived, the violence was occurring elsewhere (usually on the boundaries between Western influence and Soviet influence). This allowed other issues to receive attention.

To say that there was more order is not to say that there was more justice. The four most obvious issues that came into view were economic injustice, racial injustice, gender injustice, and ecological damage. The more ordered world gave space for rapid economic expansion, and this made injustice more evident, because when the affluence of some increased, the poverty of others stood out. Unregulated economic expansion also damaged the environment—whether this damage took the form of the pollution of air and water or a 1970s energy crisis in the United States or the destruction of rainforests in Asia and South America or the near-extinction of various species of wildlife.

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Partially as a result of the earlier wars, partially as result of the Cold War concern for identifying allies, and partially as a result of increased global trade and communication, an increasingly global orientation characterized this post-1968 period.

Giving attention to this broader array of issues was important and constructive, but it did not, of course, diminish the importance of the word of God. What it did do was to shift emphasis to “first-article concerns”—that is, to the ongoing creative activity of God. One cannot build an ecological ethic or a sexual ethic or prioritize justice or work out interreligious relations on the basis of second-article concerns alone. There needs to be attention to the broader questions of what it means to be human (in relation to the rest of creation) and to the character and purpose of creation, more widely understood.

THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

As already indicated, the story of how the context changed in the United States is quite different from what was happening internationally.

Here anxiety—about America’s future, about its use and abuse of power, about peoples who were not, as expected, accepting its claim to be the moral example of the world, and about internal changes such as racial and religious diversity—leads eventually to serious polarization.

In April 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Riots erupted in many cities, continuing five years of racial disturbances. In August of 1968, during the Democratic Convention, bloody conflicts between police and protesters erupted

on the streets of Chicago. The Tet Offensive in January of 1968 had shown that the Vietnam War would not be easily won. Lyndon B. Johnson had announced that he would not run for a second term. At least partly out of loyalty, Vice President Hubert Humphrey refused to oppose the war. The protesters wanted a candidate that would and were frustrated by the degree of control establishment Democrats exerted on the convention. They felt betrayed.

A fissure was emerging in American society. On the one side were those disillusioned by the assassinations (JFK, RFK, and MLK), by resistance to the civil rights movement, by recurring riots, by the lack of any end to the Vietnam War, and by the ongoing Cold War. On the other side were those who feared the changes in American society. They regarded those opposed to the Vietnam War as disloyal traitors, feared the changes brought about by recent civil rights legislation, feared the spread of communism, and feared the emerging new attitudes toward sexuality produced in part by the pill and expressed in slogans such as “Make Love, Not War.” My recollection of arguments in schools and churches during the years immediately following 1968 is one of intense disagreement and emotional conflict.

The so-called “southern strategy” of the late 1960s and early ’70s helped to institutionalize an alliance between those who feared changes in society and the Republican Party. During the 1980s, this alliance was extended to include many who were opposed to abortion, in the 1990s to include many who were opposed to same-sex marriage, and in the 2000s to include many who were afraid of Muslims, portraying them all as one with the extremists. The result is a religious-political voting block the media have come to call (with only partial accuracy¹⁵) “right wing or conservative evangelicals.”

The first of the two groups mentioned above went on supporting “liberal causes.” Some were motivated by Christian faith, others were not; they found common ground in their conviction that social change was necessary, but they never came together in the kind of institutional alliance forged on the right.

POLARIZATION

The polarization that began in the late 1960s has never been overcome; it has intensified. Lest I be misunderstood, what I mean by polarization is not just disagreement about some issue or holding different points of view on a wide variety of topics. Polarization occurs when people regard the positions held by those with whom they disagree to be dangerous or even un-American. Polarization then rules out any form of compromise. As David Brooks, a conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, said regarding this, “politics is no longer about argument or discussion; it’s about trying to put your opponents in the box of the untouchables.”¹⁶

¹⁵ I say “only partial accuracy” because many who share this outlook are not evangelical Protestants and not all evangelical Protestants are part of this group.

¹⁶ David Brooks, “Identity Politics Run Amok,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y85fntv8>.

What has been feeding this polarization?

One thing has been isolation. Sociologists tell us that most Americans do not talk with others who are not in the same occupation, share the same economic level, or live in the same neighborhood. Robert Putnam has traced back to the 1960s a decline in regular face-to-face contact among Americans. When he wrote his original article on this topic in 1995,¹⁷ he examined attendance at all sorts of community gatherings—PTA, bowling leagues, fraternal groups, labor unions, church groups, and the like—and found that participation in every one had declined. In other settings, he has talked about lower numbers of people visiting each other's homes, going on picnics, and the like, and he has shown how longer commutes have contributed to fewer regular face-to-face gatherings. All of this matters, he says, because regular face-to-face contact with others in the community builds trust, and this trust is the social capital that enables a community to deal with crises. His studies also have shown that, since the 1960s, both trust in other persons and trust in the government have declined significantly. From my point of view, declining trust contributes to polarization—or, at least, does nothing to reduce it.

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Another thing that has been feeding this polarization is anxiety and fear. Over the years, fears have lost their specificity and become a more generalized anxiety. Whenever a new danger arises, this lasting anxiety attaches itself to the new fear and magnifies it. We have already mentioned some of the fears that have morphed into pervasive anxiety. These include fears regarding racial change, economic dislocations, increased religious diversity, scarcity of resources, and our status in the world. In addition, during the last fifty years, we have never escaped the fear of nuclear destruction. There is, to be sure, a fear of outsiders, especially of foreign terrorists, but there also seems to be a pervasive fear of each other. In the early 1990s, a survey of gun owners indicated that most of them owned guns primarily for hunting and target practice. The survey was repeated in 2016. This time most gun owners said they own guns for protection from other people. A lead author of the study reported, “When I look at our survey, what I see is a population that is living in fear.”¹⁸ This fear fuels isolation, mistrust, allegiance to ideologies, and the resulting polarization.

¹⁷ Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy*, 1995, <https://tinyurl.com/y88elcss>. The article was later expanded into the book Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹⁸ September 30, 2016, issue of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, page A2.

A third thing fueling polarization has been structural inequities—particularly racial inequities and economic inequities.¹⁹ Various groups experience our society quite differently. Because this is so, it is easy for any one group to assume that its own very specialized experience is typical. Then what is in the self-interest of one group appears to its participants as if it should be good for all. And calls for change on the part of the victims of injustice are dismissed as if they were calls for special privileges. It is very difficult for whites to perceive their white privilege, for the rich to recognize their economic privilege, for the educated to be aware of their educational privilege, for rural and urban residents to understand each other, and so on. This difficulty contributes to polarization.

And finally, polarization is also fueled by the proclivity to endorse vastly over-simplified ideologies as if they were the whole truth about a topic. Politicians and political commentators who repeat and defend these ideologies insure their continuance, even when the assertions have no substantive basis. When an issue comes up that needs a negotiated response, rival ideologies hijack the conversation, and attention shifts to winning or losing. The result is either political paralysis or open conflict.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

So where does this leave us?

One of the tasks of the church in our setting is to foster reconciliation among the polarized factions in the United States whose entrenched conflicts are getting in the way of solving issues of discrimination, justice, and generosity toward those in need. The church can do this by encouraging regular face-to-face conversations about disputed topics among people in a community who normally would not talk with each other. In order for this to be done effectively, the project needs leaders with the skills or training to help everyone learn how to engage in respectful dialogue. And there need to be rules to which participants in the conversation subscribe (such as listening carefully enough to be able to repeat what an opponent said, using arguments rather than inflammatory rhetoric, and seeking out the additional information necessary to understand the issue). Respectful conversations alone will not solve the problems, but they will equip citizens to search for solutions and support these solutions. My experience has been that groups who are at first inclined to shout each other down can quite quickly arrive at the point where they put their differences aside to work on a problem. One of the keys to doing this is focusing on real people rather than abstract, ideologically driven agendas.

In American society, one of the other changes that has occurred in the last fifty years is a shift in the social location of congregations and clergy. In the neighborhoods of the 1950s, the institutional church had an accepted stature. Whether the neighborhood was urban or rural, people knew who the clergy were, even

¹⁹ After several decades of decline, economic inequity has been growing since 1979.

in the churches to which they did not belong. And the clergy enjoyed a respect similar to that of the local doctor. In their neighborhood as well as in their congregations, they were expected to speak for Christianity. Over the last fifty years, virtually all of this has changed. Religion has been relegated to the private sphere, and churches and their clergy have been marginalized. But, within the churches, traditional expectations have retained their hold. Clergy and church members have, by and large, not found a way to work creatively with the new status of the church. The proposal made above does not depend on the stature enjoyed pre-1968 nor does it expect to win this status back. The proposal to help the larger community overcome polarization suggests that the church begins (or continues) to serve the community more like a midwife than an authority. This approach involves a careful assessment of what is undermining the health of the community and then fostering activities that invite a wide swath of the neighborhood to rebuild its health. In some cases, not having the social prestige the church once enjoyed can even be an advantage. A congregation can more easily join hands with any other group that is willing to cooperate, including other religious groups. It can more easily avoid the perception that it is imposing its own agenda. But what is required is congregational leadership willing to break loose from traditional expectations and venture into uncharted waters. Such leaders will need to be clear about the vocation of the church as an instrument of reconciliation.

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FEATURES OF A SUPPORTIVE THEOLOGY

What this suggests is that clergy and congregations need to be supported and nurtured by an appropriate theology. The suggestions that follow are by no means comprehensive, but, drawing on the developments we have been describing, they identify some of the characteristics of a theology suited to supporting a vocationally engaged church. Though listed separately, they are all part of an interlocking set.

First off, such a theology needs to utilize the diverse theological approaches that have emerged since 1968 in such a way as to clarify and celebrate the radicality of God's grace and the urgency and scope of the Christian calling in the world. That is, it needs to avoid making any one of the diverse theological approaches its sole perspective. The church will waste its time if it allows itself to be preoccupied with pitting one of these approaches against the others.

This connects with the second, which is the most basic of the five. Such a theology needs to be relational. What I mean is that the value of any theological claim needs to be assessed on the basis of its impact (positive or negative) on relationships—relationships among humans, between humans and nature, and between God and humans. Does it enhance shalom (as understood in the biblical witness) or not? In addition, it needs to be open to paradox because relations are always complex and nuanced. They seldom can be captured by straightforward propositions. So, such a theology lives with tensions and with questions not fully answered. Though paradoxes should never be a substitute for careful thinking, paradoxes invite us to look beyond them to the deeper reality of the relationships they are seeking to describe. In our polarized society, nonparadoxical theological statements are too often employed to buttress an ideology (of the Right or the Left). A theology that is relational and open to paradox rules out dogmatism, legalism, and various sorts of ideologies (political, economic, religious, philosophical, etc.). “Ruled in” is a concern for the impact of theological claims on nature as well as humans. “Relational” is not intended here to be limited to humans.

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The third characteristic of a theology that can serve today’s church is that it needs to be vocational. A theology that is vocational invites people to focus on the well-being of neighbors near and far and to do so from a posture of listening, learning, and cooperating rather than prescribing. It provides support, encouragement, and education for laity and for congregations who struggle to discern their callings in the wider community. Rethinking is required because some patterns have been lost, while others need to be challenged because of their complicity with racial or economic or gender privilege. A theology of vocation can benefit from the broadened scope of post-1968 proposals; this broadened scope can help expand individualized conceptions of vocation, especially those narrowed to the sphere of work. Within the United States, the “right wing” has co-opted the title “Christian” for its own purposes. This has left many, especially those under thirty, suspicious of religious claims, unless their viability for the betterment of the community can be seen. They are still willing to expect that religious communities can foster the formation of community and can aid those in need, but they are not impressed by claims apart from actions. In order to have any credibility in this atmosphere, a faith community needs to invite everyone into active engagement in “ministry in daily life” (as it has sometimes been called) and in social reform. It needs to make this engagement evident to those in its midst in order to overcome the current

distrust of institutions and of any alliance with partisan politics that does not serve justice.

A fourth characteristic: a theology that can serve the church's engagement in our setting needs to be wisdom oriented and (again) open to paradox. To be wisdom oriented is to foster a deep understanding of what motivates people, how they react to outside influence, and what they need in order to live whole, healthy, relationally rich lives. Luther's theology was heavily invested in wisdom. For him, wisdom was what humans needed in order to know how to exercise their new freedom in ways that benefited others. Today, wisdom is needed to help people overcome confusion and sort out what it means to live a purposeful, fulfilling life. Wisdom is inherently paradoxical. For example, it recognizes the damage injustice does to its victims, but it also recognizes the dehumanizing influence on those who seem to benefit from it. It recognizes that an action done for selfish reasons can benefit persons in need while another action done for well-intentioned reasons can bring them harm. Paradoxes are simply by-products of a full recognition of the complexity of humans and human communities and the complexity of ecological communities whose health is currently in peril. They are an aspect of wisdom.

A fifth characteristic of a theology that can serve today's church is that it needs to be justice oriented. The church's actions in behalf of the neighbor need to take account of those social structures and social assumptions that bring harm to groups of people. This is part of what it can learn from the explorations of the last fifty years. But this concern for justice must include a concern for wisdom and a concern for relationality. Neither trying to promote justice by demonizing a group of people nor trying to help others without attention to unjust social structures will serve reconciliation and healing. And just to be clear, the misuse of nature is a justice issue.

The changes of the last fifty years have expanded the church's calling. With the right kind of theological resources and with its many social resources, it can undertake significant new (or revived) ventures that will benefit our larger society. For this to happen, contemporary Christians will need to learn how to live faithfully into their calling. Western Christians will need to do this gracefully, without claims to cultural dominance. ⊕

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