



Will Our Faith Have Children?*

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I want to consider the claims of evangelical faith around the biblical metaphor of children. In 1976 John Westerhoff asked, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*¹ By this he meant, Will we transmit our faith to the next generation?—undoubtedly an important and serious question. My title plays on that theme and seeks to turn it around: Will our faith have children? Such a theme might mean with Westerhoff, Will there be a next generation which still believes? Or it might cut below that to ask, Will there be a next generation at all? Is there a future, given the precarious reality of our human community in a nuclear age, for in that context the crucial question is not even the survival of faith, but the survival of the children. But I really mean to cut underneath that as well to ask, Will we be open enough, risking enough, vulnerable enough, that God may give us a future that we do not plan or control or contrive? By the question, “Will our faith have children?” I mean to ask, Are we open enough to receive a future from God which will surprise us?—for it is assumed in evangelical faith that any real future is given us underived, unextrapolated, *ex nihilo*, by the mercy of God (cf. 1 Cor 4:7).

I. SARAH’S LYRICAL POSSIBILITY OF NEW CHILDREN

The Old Testament is much occupied with the securing of an heir, with the reception of a seed for the future which assures that our present generation is not the last one. That of course is the main theme of the Abraham-Sarah narrative. But the affirmative use of the metaphor of a future child is most poignant in Isaiah 54:1-3:

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in travail!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.

*Adapted slightly from an inaugural address upon induction to the Evangelical Chair of Biblical Interpretation at Eden Theological Seminary on February 10, 1983.

¹John Westerhoff, III, *Will our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out:
hold not back, lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.

For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your descendants will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities.

The community of believers was in exile. They were without resources, cut off from Jerusalem and the temple, doubtful of God's power, enmeshed in a Babylonian life-world that shaped everything in ways alien to them. And they had no prospect of a way out, no hope for a next generation. They had no continuing city, no abiding structures, no enduring myths. They were bereft of possibility. (No wonder that great evangelical preacher of the sixteenth century wrote about the "Babylonian captivity of the church"!)

And this poet wants to announce a fresh, inexplicable intervention of God which will liberate, permit homecoming and evoke the anticipated community of obedience. Isaiah uses many poetic devices, but none more astonishing than the metaphor of the children. Yes, your faith will have children. The barren one is Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 29:30) and Hannah (1 Sam 1:2). Ours is a community of barren women and unproductive men (cf. Heb 11:12) with no possibility of creating a future of their own. The barren one in this poem is exiled Israel, and the church whenever it reaches the end of its resources, which is often and soon, and surely now.

Precisely to the barren one is the promise, "Sing barren one, you who have not been in labor." Rejoice because from barrenness issues a new generation which will outreach the married, full, affluent, technologically secure Babylon. The statement is nonsensical unless it is taken as evangelical, i.e., hope against the reason of the day. It is the same reality given in the Exodus when the Israelite women, with their midwives, terrified the empire with their many births (Exod 1:17-22). The births are inexplicable, caused only by the powerful graciousness of God who will work a newness when all is lost. The poet resorts to such a domestic, intimate metaphor. But the domestic metaphor, of course, has political and public freight, as the emperor always recognizes. It concerns the dismantling of all imperial forms of life. It offers the strange calculus of God's weakness being strong, of God's foolishness being wise, of the humbled folk being exalted in their call (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). It is an utterly absurd, unscientific poem which embarrasses our technical reason and must have embarrassed those Jews in exile who had compromised with Babylonian modes of reality. A newness not scheduled in any of the social scientific grids of the day is hardly cause for reorganization and departing, unless of course the listening community makes a break in its reason.

The metaphor is played out in Isaiah 54 with a marvelously playful picture as getting stronger tent pegs and tent cords, because the peasant abode will be crawling with children, spreading abroad, seizing the land, reoccupying the city, no doubt terrifying the emperor as previously done to the Pharaoh. The force unleashed in this poetic promise brings to naught the things that are (1 Cor

1:28). Poetic metaphor must be used to speak these things, because no other language is adequate to the radical, surely irrational inversion of the world.²

II. THE FUTURE OF SARAH'S HOPE

But this text has a future. The metaphor in that poem serves the church well. Paul is driven to the edge of his considerable intellectual gifts to express the wonder of the gospel. In his letter to the Galatians he wants to characterize the stultifying life of knuckling under to the rulers of this age (read “law,” read “numbness,” read “docility,” read “fascination with technical reason,” read “despair”). That Paul is able to do. But when he comes to characterize the evangelical alternative, his reasonable words fail. As elsewhere at his moment of payoff, Paul must break back into poetry. How remarkable that this new situation with this fresh first century crisis point is drawn to the same sixth century poem, reiterated in Galatians 4:27:

Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear;
break forth and shout, thou who art not in travail;
for the desolate hath more children
than she who hath a husband.

Again the issue is not Sarah and Hagar. But it is also not Babylon and exile as in Isaiah 54. Now it is the scribal consciousness which cannot receive the newness of the gospel. Paul is of course fascinated with the birth metaphor, because it is a way to speak of an unutterable, inexplicable gift. So in Galatians 4:19, he can write: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!” That text suggests a growth of the embryo of Christ in the body of believers. And in Romans 8:22 Paul characterizes the whole world in painful labor for the redemption of our bodies.

Our theological tradition, revolutionary as it is, does not absolutize the Babylonian order, nor the rule of positive law. Our theological tradition, radical as it is, does not absolutize the present contrived economic arrangement, because there is a groaning and a time to come when our bodies will be redeemed and an end to alienated work. Our theological tradition, radical as it is, does not absolutize any intellectual scheme, any closed system of signs that imagines all the truth is given and all the judgments already rendered. We treasure this free mother Sarah who is bound in freedom only for the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22). Mother Sarah stands as a metaphor for the possibilities given to us that lie beyond our contriving and conjuring, the only source of new children.

III. RACHEL'S GRIEVING SONG OF LOSS

But talk about newness is easy, easier than reality. And our talk must not be easy or glib. Israel knows that as well. We do remember former things (cf. Ps 137:4-6). We remember them partly because we covet the wrong things and do not want to relinquish. But we also remember them because we cherish the right things

²On the crisis of finding an adequate language, see Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), chapter 4.

and properly linger. Isaiah 54:1-3 and Galatians 4:27 are an invitation to move beyond and let life be shattered for God's new act of life (above all see Isa 43: 18~19). But Israel engages in no self-deception. Any such newness is likely to be romantic and not enduring.

So the main point I wish to argue about evangelical faith is this: Second Isaiah could not announce the new birth until there had been two generations of Jeremiah to grieve the loss. The other side of evangelical faith, the first side of the dialectic which claims us, is the pathos-filled speech of Jeremiah 31:15:

Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are not.³

Will our faith have children indeed! It has already had them—and lost them.

The rhetoric of Jeremiah takes us to the ash-heap of burnt Jerusalem. The prophet saw the burnt temple, the charred city walls. He observed the absence of the royal court. He named the names of those carried away to Babylon. He took note of the brutality of the Babylonian armies, the damage done even to civilians, to unvalued women and innocent children. The sweep of imperial death takes all. The Deuteronomists might have explained it all as warranted punishment given a cynical calculus. But it is the task of poets to cut underneath such conventional certitudes and discern the human cost and the human hurt. Those killed in 587, as in any such holocaust, were not numbers in a simple calculus nor statistics in the nightly news in Babylon. They were named, loved children. They had mothers and fathers who cared for them and who called them for supper (and they did not answer). And Second Isaiah may delight in the labor room of new possibility. But we must not delight to go there too soon. We linger at the morgue over the charred bodies which can hardly be identified. And we grieve them because they are the treasured children, the only future we shall ever have, now brutally become past, irreversible past. And we know that we shall never have any others, only these, so we flinch from the question too easily put, Will our faith have children?

Rachel is weeping for her children,
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are not.

Evangelical faith is not escape to a naive, never-never land. There are pseudo-forms of evangelical faith which move easily to the next triumph and the next wave of the future.⁴ But serious evangelical faith is of another kind. It is as

³On this text, I am especially helped and moved by the comments of Emil Fackenheim, “New Hearts and Old Covenant: On Some Possibilities of a Fraternal Jewish-Christian Reading of the Jewish Bible Today,” *The Divine Helmsman*, ed. by James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel (New York: KTAV, 1980) 191-205. See also Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) chapters 6, 12, 14, and K. Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1965).

⁴Such pseudo-forms of evangelical faith may appear in secular fascinations with “passages” which know too much about the outcome, and in religious certitudes that promise too much too soon and without real risk or pain.

concrete as today, as specific as Rachel, as vulnerable as these little bodies. It is indignant with rage over the inhumanity. And that is why the mothers and fathers of many of us were evangelical long before the name got coopted and trivialized for triumphalist American imperialism. The true evangelicals are those whose eye notices the hurt and whose nose smells the grief. It is the poet of faith who has himself battled God but now is free enough of his own agenda to look beyond self to notice those in his world crushed by the rapacious system, destroyed by self-seeking and stunned by the very cut of steel against baby fat. And the crying he imagines is for the children, incidentally for the governors of such a deathly system and the religious ones who pray over it (cf. Luke 19:41-44).

And no word of comfort must be spoken now. It is a mockery to comfort. And nobody is as irrelevant in such a moment of reality as is Second Isaiah with his buoyant, hopeful poem. Not wrong, just grossly inappropriate.

IV. THE RESILIENCE OF RACHEL'S GRIEF

Jeremiah of course stands deep in tradition in this moment of pathos. Rachel learned how to cry this way, because she had been wife to this husband Jacob, whose life is one of pathos. We are not in the grand symmetrical tranquility of Abraham who never seemed to be bothered and who, with Sarah, laughed (cf. Gen 17:17; 18:12; 21:6). We are in the rage-filled, incongruous world of Jacob and Rachel, who know conflict and cunning, who value life in its raw gift and are not given to grand speculation or noble faith. This generation always lives at the eleventh hour of precariousness-and now "they are not."

Now with father Jacob, Rachel is dead. There will be no more children. Jacob treasures the ones he has. And then in Genesis 37 (after Rachel is dead, 35:19-20, and the faith will have no more children), enter the older brothers who are as filled with rage as was Jacob with Esau. And for good reason they despise the beloved Joseph. They must needs lie to their father. And so they bring the beloved son's robe, blood covered. And Jacob believes them, to deep grief. And then the narrative catches the mood of death and grief (37:35):

All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him;
but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go
down to Sheol to my son, mourning."

He refused to be comforted. He was not comforted until he held his grown, precious son in his arms (46:29-30). The one who was lost is found, was dead and is alive (cf. Luke 15:24). But until that inexplicable moment, Jacob refused to be comforted. No spiritual assurance, no neighborly acts, no piety, no religious or mythic continuities would matter. The father pushed that all away and embraced the dark rawness where God's promises seem not to carry. And Rachel in 587, so long afterwards but with poignant, painful memory, now echoes Jacob, with the important difference that as yet, there is no restoration. The children are gone. Rachel also asks, Will our faith have children? And she knows the heavy answer. It is "No." The grief is for loss, for hopelessness, for a future that is closed. Only the glib can say "yes" in the face of Babylonian brutality.

Rachel in her grief looks both ways. She looks back to Jacob who will not be comforted for beloved Joseph. But Rachel also looks forward and nothing is changed. So Matthew can write of the brutality of Herod who tries to eliminate the gospel by killing the boy babies:

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more. (Matt 2:18)

Herod wants to make sure that the faith has no children, because the only sure way to keep the old order intact is to be sure this faith yields no children. And the deathly truth is that Herod and Rachel are united in this moment in believing that there will be no children for the faith. That Herod draws that conclusion is one more act of self-serving brutality. Rachel reaches the same conclusion in deep chagrin and grief.

V. FAITH POISED BETWEEN SARAH'S HOPE AND RACHEL'S GRIEF

Now I propose an evangelical structuring of biblical faith around the metaphor of children, a statement about openness to God's surprise. I have tried to suggest two shapings of the motif. One motif is the *ecstasy of surprising birth*, deriving from Sarah, used by Paul, but focusing on *the exile-ending lyrics of Isaiah 54:1-3*. The other motif is *grieving for lost children*, looking back to father Jacob in Genesis, looking toward Herod and the slaughter of precious, not just innocent, but precious children, and focusing on *the exile-embracing lament of Jeremiah 31:15*.

Pursuant to our question, will our faith have children, these two texts and their related clusters of texts, provide ways for giving an answer. Isaiah 54 answers vigorously, joyously, unambiguously, "yes." The poet evokes the faith of exiles with freedom enough to go home (52:11-12), to relinquish imperial connection, to celebrate the rule of the liberating God in the face of Babylonian claims (46:1-4), to eat free bread in the face of coercive bread (55:1-3). The faith of those exiles will have children, abundant generations of heirs freely given, unimagined, uncontrived, given by the generosity of God, far more abundantly than we ask or think (cf. Eph 3:20).

But on the other hand, the pathos-filled word of Jeremiah also faces the question, Will our faith have children? Jeremiah, I suspect (and Rachel with him), would have been appalled not at the answer of Second Isaiah, but at the senselessness of the question. How dare anyone ask for new children or hope for them, for don't you know about the loss of children, the precious children, the only children (cf. Gen 22:2)? And we do not hope and dare not hope for new ones or different ones, because these are the ones. For these we must refuse to be comforted. And so the question about such a new future is rather irrelevant and evokes no interest in the generation that knows the loss.

Emil Fackenheim has noticed a shrewd thing about Job.⁵ In the first chapter (1:2-3) and in the last chapter (42:12-13) of Job, what he had at the beginning is nicely contrasted with what he had at the end. And in all things but one, everything is precisely doubled at the restoration: from 7000 sheep to 14,000 sheep; from 3000 camels to 6000 camels; from 500 yoke of oxen to 1000 yoke of oxen; and from 500 she-asses to 1000 she-asses. In all things save one, Job has been doubly blessed. At the beginning he has seven sons and three daughters. At the end he has precisely seven sons and three daughters. They have not been multiplied or doubled. The number of the children is the only number taken seriously, for children, the wave of our future, are precious, nonclonable, irrepeatable, concrete and irreversible. So concrete are they that at the end, the daughters are named, which sets them even beyond the sons.

Evangelical faith is not only *buoyant about new gifts* surprisingly given. Evangelical faith is *candid and unflinching about hurt, loss, grief, endings* in human history which are real and painful and not covered over. The concrete embrace of deep death is as evangelical as is the lyrical celebration of new gift. And so the answer to our question must not be made lightly, easily, unambiguously, or with excessive buoyance.

It is the key problem of our faith about how to relate continuity and discontinuity⁶ and we trouble about it in theological education. We ask whether the buoyant continuities cancel out and nullify the grief. And how strange that when we engage in such affirmations, we are at the same time deep into the hurt and rage that is not nullified. That is the problem of faith, and that is the discernment now made about our Enlightenment self-deception, that our ways of transcending trouble may *suppress* but do not *nullify*. The critical problem that belongs to our question is how to relate the *pathos of Jeremiah* to the *buoyancy of Second Isaiah*.

It is clear enough, I judge, that Second Isaiah knew of the poetry of Jeremiah. When he uttered this triumphant note of 54:1-3, he surely had not forgotten the pathos of Jeremiah 31:15. The linkage between the two texts is of course evident in the general theme. But the connection is not only thematic, but is evident in a common verbal usage.⁷ Thus Jeremiah 31:19 has:

I was ashamed (*bōštî*)
and I was confounded (*niklamtî*)
because I bore the disgrace (*harpat*) of my youth (*ne'ûrî*).

And Isaiah 54:4 has:

You will not be ashamed (*tebōšî*)
be not confounded (*tikkalmî*)

⁵The connections between Jeremiah and Job on critical grounds are sufficient warrant to draw an imaginative link between the two literatures.

⁶Peter Ackroyd, "Continuity and Discontinuity: Rehabilitation and Authentication," *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. by Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 215-34, has pointed to the resilient ways in which the community of faith struggles for continuity in the face of the painful and real discontinuities of experience.

⁷I am indebted to my student, Kevin Andrews, for having called my attention to these precise parallels.

...you will forget the shame (*bošet*) of your youth (‘*alumayik*)
and the reproach (*herpat*) of your widowhood.

The Isaiah passage appears to be a quite deliberate and intentional response to and nullification of the Jeremiah text (perhaps Ezek 36:32 which also uses *boš* and *kalam* is a middle term between the Jeremiah and Isaiah passages). Perhaps the key issue of evangelical faith, i.e., good news to exiles, is caught in how one can speak such a promise with full recognition of and respect for the loss and hurt already on the table. I could think of several ways that Isaiah 54:1-3 can follow Jeremiah 31:15.

First, it is possible to take the point *chronologically*, a possibility not without merit. The grief of Jeremiah and of Rachel had been full, had spent itself, for time does indeed heal. It had been two long generations. Grief finally does reach its bottom.⁸ When it has reached that point, a new, good word is permissible, even if not too soon. And possibly this bottoming in exilic Israel is aided by the reality of the poetry of the Book of Lamentations which is undoubtedly lodged between these two poets.⁹ The way to move from Jeremiah to Second Isaiah is by way of Lamentations which gives full range to the loss. It is there that Israel goes the full way to the bottom, and then begins to move out. The links between Lamentations and Second Isaiah are still to be traced. But I have no doubt that the theme of “Comfort, Comfort” (Isa 40:1) is an intentional response of “None to Comfort” (Lam 1:2, 9, 17, 21). And the newness of Isaiah 43:18-19 maybe triggered by the anticipated newness of Lamentations 3:22-23. Moreover, the historical changes in the period, from Babylon to Persia, specifically Cyrus, permit a new word of hope. And that also can be traced chronologically.

Second, it is possible that we should not take these texts chronologically but *dialectically*, i.e., read them as theological statements informing and correcting each other, rather than as historical statements following in a single sequence. And to an evangelical Christian reading from the dialectic of Good Friday and Easter, such away has considerable merit.¹⁰ Thus Israel knows too much to answer our question only with the lyric of Isaiah 54, but must always answer with both *grief and surprise*, and neither must supersede or nullify the other.

Third, taking into account the first two possibilities, chronological and dialectical, one may say it this way. It is the unmitigated grief of Rachel that is the parlance of hope. The grief of Israel is the only arena in which God’s newness

⁸See George A. Benson, *Then Joy Breaks Through* (New York: Seabury, 1972). Of course Benson does not suggest that the mere passage of time will resolve matters, for suppressed hurt endures with power. But Benson does reflect on the reality of a bottoming that is reached on occasions of unflinching candor.

⁹On the distinctive theological contribution of Lamentations, see Norman Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (Chicago: Allenson, 1954). As Gottwald sees, the bottoming is reached in Lamentations in a way consonant with Benson’s suggestions, i.e., through genuine candor and pain.

¹⁰The dialectic of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah is in decisive ways an anticipation of the dialectic of crucifixion/resurrection, which has been most clearly articulated by Jürgen Moltmann, especially in his two books on the two points of the dialectic, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) and *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

appears. So the grief is not to be chronologically superseded, not dialectically corrected, but rather is the experiential matrix wherein newness must be born, if it is to be birthed at all. It is in the moment of such grief that the deep groans are uttered wherein the revealing of the children of God can happen, there and nowhere else (Rom 8:19). It has been so since the beginning of our people in Exodus 2:23-25. So Paul who knows so much about these two evangelical poets learns with them that it is precisely suffering—embraced and practiced and articulated—that produces hope (Rom 5:3-4). Suffering peculiarly produces hope like nothing else, but it must be suffering brought to speech in faithful ways.

Of course Second Isaiah knows that. So the barren Sarah—it could have been barren, bereaved Rachel—is addressed in the same chapter 54: “O afflicted, storm-tossed and not comforted” (54:11). Sarah, exiled Israel, is also “not comforted,” as is Rachel in Jeremiah 31:15. It is precisely the one “not comforted,” the one “refusing to be comforted” who has the chance of comfort. It is Rachel who has been all through the book of Lamentations who finally is reached by this poet, “Comfort, comfort, people.” These poets and this people know that in the person of Sarah, Rachel is also present.

So exegetically we come to the answer: “Yes, our faith will have children.” But our faith will not have children if it imagines it can hold on to the old ones. And our faith will not have children if we glibly rush to newness. And our faith will not have children if we imagine we can just move from strength to strength, from children to children, and in matters of human pathos simply balance things off. It is indelibly written in our tradition, that our children, i.e. our future from God, are given only when we linger long over the loss. Lingering long and honestly over the loss is foundational for newness. Elie Wiesel has observed how strange it is that it is the survivors of the Holocaust who can yet believe in this God of pathos.¹¹ But the other Jews who have not been into such hurt doubt more easily. It is not different with us Christians who must be suspicious of those who easily promise new children without grief.

VI. ON IMITATING SARAH AND DENYING RACHEL

Thus far exegetically. Let me say why I think this could matter to us. The glib hope of new children without grief I take to be a primary issue for our culture, an issue for those of us who are accustomed to having our way promptly about everything. And I take that temptation to be a primary task of pastoral responsibility. The task is to nurture people into the embrace of loss while at the same time our culture seeks to deny with phony promises and *Ersatz* continuities.

In this connection I refer to two studies which ought to concern us mightily. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich,¹² following Freud’s study of

¹¹Elie Wiesel, “Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent,” *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, ed. by Franklin H. Littell and Hobert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1974) 271-74. I am grateful to Robert McAfee Brown for this reference.

¹²Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn* (New York: Grove, 1975). I was led to this analysis by Robert Lifton’s work, but see also the use made of their work by Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 158.

melancholy, have considered the National Socialist movement in Germany, and have found

important roots in the German response to the losses of 1918 and Versailles. They suggest that the movement of Hitler is in part rooted in the inability to mourn. And because of that inability, society engaged in an enormous act of denial with all the religion needed to make it legitimate.

Closer home, Robert Jay Lifton¹³ has studied American responses to the nuclear threat. He suggests our cultural situation is one in which there is

an inability to believe in larger connections by pervasive expressions of psychic numbing. These states can be directly manifested in various kinds of apathy, unrelatedness and general absence of trust or faith; or more indirectly in social, artistic and political struggles to break out of that numbing.¹⁴

He goes on to argue that the inability to mourn is part of a general breakdown in the symbolizing process, a form of dislocation so that experience can have no form. And the response to such an inability is deadening self-indulgence—of rank, individualism, or authoritarianism.

So I have settled on this theme of new children and loss of children, because I believe it concerns the ministry of the church in overriding ways. It concerns our common ministry, first because I believe this is a fair assessment of what is happening in our culture, a refusal to face these issues and a loss of political discourse about them.

Second, it concerns the ministry of the church because there is so much fraudulent religion that denies and does not face up. And that religious temptation may come either in fake evangelicalism which tells what we want to hear with shameless certitude, or it may come as rational mysticism which screens out the historical, public issues. And we are tempted in both ways in our theological tradition.

It concerns the ministry of the church, third, because those of us who purport to be genuinely evangelical are entrusted precisely with the resources and discernments which could matter. So it is my judgment that what our culture now urgently needs is indeed what is entrusted to us. But an evangelical ministry must fly in the face of most of the ideology of our time, secular and religious, for this tradition knows that Second Isaiah could rejoice only after Jeremiah, with Rachel, has refused to be comforted.

VII. SEASONS OF SUFFERING—COMMUNITIES OF HOPE

Finally permit me to hazard some constructive statement growing out of these exegetical comments. In doing so, I am trying to proceed along the lines of Walker Percy¹⁵ who distinguishes between knowledge and news, and news available “on the island” and news from “across the sea,” i.e., disclosure that intrudes from outside our system but which is urgent for us. To answer this ques-

¹³Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 293-94.

¹⁵Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), chapter 6.

tion, Will our faith have children? requires not just knowledge which is everywhere true, not just news from the island of our habitation, but news from across the sea.

First, if I have rightly articulated an evangelical discernment of reality, we ask what of

this evangelical faith *in American society*. I read and experience the American dream (call it Enlightenment Project, progress) as a rush too easily toward new children, bright tomorrows, more security, new energy resources, all within reach. It is so in political terms, and it is true in much of establishment religion. And such certitude is a seduction in seminary and church alike.

One never knows about the signs of the times. But there is reason to think that the metaphor of dismantling in 587, to which Jeremiah addressed himself, is not alien to where we may be headed culturally. There is reason to think we face now a great disappointment and a deep loss.¹⁶ One can surmise that the desperate move to put the wagons in a circle reflects the sense of danger now common to us: that that American dream we have lived is precarious, if not ending. And it helps very little to offer scientific or religious certitudes that cushion the break.

The church's ministry is not only prophetic to *note the ending*, but pastoral to *embrace the ending*, for with our dominant historical position, we may have as much to grieve as does Rachel. Surely songs are to be sung about new children, children to the barren one. But first the loss and the grief and the barrenness must be faced full, and we may not be very skillful (cf. Amos 5:16) or willing about that (Amos 6:6). Our propensity is to deny, cover up, supersede the loss.

Second, cautiously I suggest this mode of evangelical faith requires a new look at what we are about *in theological education*. For as Robert Lynn has observed, we have become compatible with cultural dreams which are not really or primally our own. And we shall, by choice or necessity, in the next years get opportunity to rethink that compatibility. For seminaries may rightly grieve for times and children treasured and now gone. For if exile comes to the faithful church, the seminary is no place in which to be safe from it. And we may not order our life as an immunity from the loss. Perhaps the seminary also has been a place of too much certitude, ready to sing before we grieve our own deep ambiguity; perhaps the seminary too easily embraces the norms of the academy, because it is easier to follow the right forms than to face the raw substance never fully caught in form; perhaps the seminary has come to terms too fully with economic sufficiency, when members of the seminary—faculty, students, and board—count too much on treasures that comfort the heart (and that also is a measure of our enmeshment); and perhaps the seminary has become too nearly a collection of “autonomous” believers, endlessly fascinated with ourselves, not very good at being the body of the one Lord. And the voice of Rachel may be an imperative voice for our future.

Third, if culture must face the loss, if seminary might relinquish in order to receive, then what of *the church constituency we dare to call evangelical*? The church

¹⁶See the thoughtful theological analysis of this turn-point by Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See also the shrewd argument of Carl A. Raschke, *The Bursting of New Wineskins* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978).

may in time to come recall with relief and gratitude that we are not summoned to be an echo of culture, either to admire its economics, to embrace its psychology, or to certify its morality. But we are permitted an alternative way (cf. 1 Cor 12:31-13:13) which to some will feel subversive and to others a more excellent way, and to some both subversive and excellent. The church will now and then affirm that we are about dangerous things in its seminaries. We are not replicating dangerous things of another generation, but being led to the danger peculiar to our time. None of

us knows what that might mean. But what a difference to have the church aware of the danger that comes with the loss of children and future, expectant that the loss will be embraced, ready to accompany in places where we have not been, wanting finally to sing of new children, new future, surely, but not too soon.

If we choose to be ultimately that evangelical, there are of course many ways in which penultimately we continue the old ways. Penultimately, we shall be a culture that continues to seek order, security, and prosperity. But we shall have an open edge toward the harder, more demanding human issues of justice and humanness. Penultimately, a seminary must continue to seek academic excellence and financial well-being. But we shall have an open edge toward the harder, more demanding faith questions of passion in a sea of apathy, of community in a torrent of individualism. Penultimately we shall be a church that continues to seek growth and influence and respectability. But we shall have an open edge toward the harder, more demanding evangelical questions of faithfulness, renewal, and reformation. Penultimate continuities for our culture, for the seminary, for the church, are not to be mocked or treated lightly. But ultimately our vocation calls us to notice the cost of these continuities, costs in terms of repression, denial, self-deception, and exploitation; costs which finally we are not called to pay. So we are called, I submit, with precious gifts and peculiar discernment, with odd power and access to be present to the discontinuities where the new children are given in faith. Such birth is in mighty and painful labor. The children given us new by faith are never an easy birth. But it is the birth for which we wait in eager longing.

Now this may leave a rather burdensome and heavy impression. I do not mean it or sense it so. I do not perceive it as despairing. I do affirm that the news of future children inexplicably given by the mercy of God is indeed the gospel. I do celebrate that we may sing that song of doxological discontinuity in which we are startled by gift. And I gratefully acknowledge that we are a community that believes our faith has a future. But I yearn for it to be a future not filled with deception or cover-up, pretense or denial, numbness or old habits, but a new future given precisely for us when we fully grieve that the old is lost and gone. The future is given to us by the God known fully in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Of that One, Rachel weeps on Friday utterly bereft, and Sarah sings on Sunday, utterly stunned.