



The Role of Scripture in Times of Crisis

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Though denial is rampant in our day, on some deep, perhaps even intuitive level, most people sense that we are living in troubled and potentially very dangerous times, and they are searching for guidance. Threatening clouds seem to be invading all areas of life, from personal health to economic stability to world peace. To be sure, troubled and dangerous times are nothing new in human history. They divide into two types, however, crises which were met with vision and courage and which proved to be thresholds to more just and peaceful eras, and crises which failed to give rise to strong leadership and which proved to herald descents into human tragedy. It is no mere academic question which we pose when we ponder, to which type does our present crisis belong? Will the problems which beset us lead to a deepening of the foundations of our lives, or will we abet personal and social decay through denial of our problems and continuation of a wanton life style? One observation which we can make is this: In our own civilization's history, the Bible often has played a central role in motivating a courageous response to crisis. As a preliminary step to asking what role the Bible may play today, we shall therefore look to our past.

THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN THE PAST

That the Bible has been a source of vision and courage in troubled periods of the past is not surprising when one realizes that it is a confessional literature which arose out of times of trial and testing. It is one of the mysteries of divine revelation that God has entered human history at points of oppression and brokenness. What we know of the human heart from our personal experiences with success and defeat allows us to peer into that mystery and surmise that all too frequently human hearts are opened to God's presence only in brokenness.

At the dawn of God's relating to the human family, it was the grim experience of slavery that created a condition of receptiveness to Yahweh the Divine Deliverer. A people was born of this deliverance, and the exodus became its chief symbol of community under God. At the center of time, this community was being swirled amidst a maelstrom of world events which threatened it with assimi-

lation to rival cults and diverse forms of paganism. Brokenness amidst confusing crosscurrents created within Israel a remnant open to God's most incisive and inclusive act on behalf of humanity, the life of Jesus which revealed God's love as the unbounded reaching out to deliver the human family from its bondage. The new people born of this event bore the symbol of the cross.

Exodus and cross do not exhaust the symbolism of our heritage, but they delineate clearly the inner dynamic of that heritage. Profoundly, they point to both poles which pull at humans. In the exodus is portrayed both slavery and deliverance; in the cross both death and resurrection. For the community focusing on these symbols, there is no escaping the basic fact that life is a precarious affair, midway between damnation and salvation. Decision cannot be avoided by the one facing crisis, and life thrusts this either/or on every individual and community.

We cannot survey here the history of the neglect and rediscovery of these symbols which is the story of our past. If we did we would see periods in which elaborate religious structures were built up around exodus and cross until they were obscured and their force blunted. Furthermore, we would find instances of exodus and cross being perverted into instruments of exploitation and oppression. But we would also come across periods when exodus and cross broke out of dogmatic restraints, repudiated perverted uses, and addressed the heart of the Christian community by pronouncing a death decree on human pride and by startling the repentant into receiving the only available avenue of rebirth, God's self-giving love.

THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE AT THE BIRTH OF OUR NATION

Since we are inquiring into the role of the Bible within a particular social context, we shall look briefly at the situation which existed in the early years of our own history as a nation. On these shores gathered a people with vivid memories of oppression, who now breathed their first waft of freedom. For them the Bible was the chief source of symbolism in their struggle against the continued efforts of the oppressor to forge and apply new shackles. In their epic they wrote that they had escaped from Egypt, and after crossing the Red Sea and wandering through the Wilderness they had entered the New Land of Promise. There they struggled to translate deliverance into an enduring life in Covenant. From the Bible they derived guidelines as to how individual and communal qualities could be balanced, how a republic upholding principles of equality and justice could be established, and how a citizenry capable of nurturing the ongoing process of democratic reform could be cultivated. On the basis of these principles they conducted a search for forms which could best safeguard the quality of life they held dear. Their commitment to the principles found in the Bible did not limit their search for appropriate, institutional forms. For our founding ancestors the most suitable forms for their democratic purposes were found in the Roman Republic.

Guided by the symbols of exodus and chosen people, our ancestors were aware of both sides of life's struggle, slavery and deliverance, damnation and election. They wrote into the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution principles guaranteeing freedom and equality, principles elaborated on by the Amendments. And the religiously sensitive among them insisted that the Cove-

nant could be maintained only by a community of the redeemed. Great emphasis was therefore placed on personal conversion.

This courageous and idealistic beginning, however, was early threatened by two developments which, while themselves relating to biblical sources, threatened the very biblical principles upon which the country was founded: 1) neglect and finally betrayal of those covenant principles; 2) perversion of the symbols of exodus and chosenness into rationalizations for

imperialistic conquest and for exploitation of native Americans, African slaves, Mexicans and other non-AngloSaxon peoples.¹

The first development, betrayal of the covenant principles, was feared by our founding ancestors from early pre-Revolutionary times. They observed how easily the sacrifice and communal concern which were essential to the founding and preservation of a republic could be vitiated by personal greed. They drew on Moses and the prophets in urging the people to undergird the national or external covenant with the inward covenant predicated on personal conversion. In 1630 John Winthrop made this eloquent speech to the hearts of his followers before disembarking from his ship to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to follow the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluties, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meeknes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity, wee must delight in each other, make others Conditions our owne, rejoyce together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes, soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth than formerly wee have been acquainted with.²

Jonathan Edwards and other leaders of the Great Awakening were able to keep the ideals of the emerging nation alive in the 1740s, mainly because their bearers acknowledged the authority of the Bible. But soon the negative side of Israel's exodus and election experiences asserted itself in the New Israel, giving rise to warnings like that found in a Revolutionary Period sermon entitled: "The American States Acting Over the Past of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness and Thereby Impeding Their Entrance into Canaan's Rest."³ And in the early eighteenth century, as the energy of individuals turned increasingly to amassing personal fortune, and as utilitarian motivations steadily overpowered covenant ideals, the outcries of Calvinists, Evangelists and Quakers protesting the decay of covenant community became voices crying in the wilderness.

The second development, perverted use of the biblical symbols, was

¹Both of these developments are skillfully analyzed, with documentation, by Robert N. Bellah in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²Quoted in Bellah, 14.

³Bellah, 29.

perhaps more pernicious than the first. When individuals engaged in practices which were in clear violation of biblical principles, prophets could call forth the wrath of God. But when

national leaders began to use the biblically derived symbols of exodus and covenant and chosen people in defense of national aggrandizement and gross exploitation, criticism could be muted by being labeled unpatriotic. In defense of our army's opposition to the Filipino revolution, Senator Albert J. Beveridge, for example, appealed to the manifest destiny of our nation:

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No. He made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigned. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.⁴

The ravaging effects of this national hubris cannot be documented here; it fills volumes, and much is yet unwritten. Many have been the unconsenting recipients of our arrogant vision, and those who bear its scars include native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, and peoples of many distant lands. But our purpose here is not a blanket condemnation of everything America has stood for and done, for that history also records the blood which flowed on our native soil in the struggle over slavery, and the blood shed on European soil in opposing Nazi madness. We merely want to counterbalance the tendency to focus exclusively on moments of courage and glory in the writing of national history, for application of biblical symbols must remind us of both slavery and deliverance, death and resurrection. Only as we as a people remember the lucrative slave trade, the shame of Wounded Knee, the hell of Hiroshima, and then repentantly relate to the victims of these and other tragedies can we experience the remorse and the brokenness which can become the context for God's address through the Word and through the testimony of contemporary witnesses to God's activity.

THE NATURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

The need to call attention to the dark side of our history should be clear. The impetus to glorify our triumphs and repress our shameful acts is as natural as it is powerful. Times of deep crises add new force to this impetus. At present there are signs of a rise in nationalistic arrogance, and it can be interpreted as a defensive posture responding to the inability to resolve, with application of traditional techniques, problems like an ailing economy and a decline of prestige abroad. We should be wary of the onesidedness of the chauvinistic response which many leaders are presently commending: "We Americans are all right. Others are to blame." For such excuses hide the deep source of our problems even as they deflect emphasis away from legitimate efforts to reform our wasteful, gluttonous ways by adopting more austere, less consumptive and materialistic styles of life.

⁴Bellah, 38.

Such excuses celebrate as "the American Way" the perverted development begun in the early

eighteenth century which Thomas Jefferson feared would be the source of our undoing as a nation: more production, more consumption, more accumulation of wealth in the hands of the privileged, fewer and fewer restraints on greed, reduced effort to balance individual and social needs, in sum, breakdown of the kind of individual integrity without which a republic cannot prosper, and loss of the last semblance of public conscience.

But do the popular excuses bear scrutiny? Are we as Americans all right with blame to be placed solely on OPEC, Japanese exports and social welfare programs? I detect in our country a malaise which arises out of the same unwillingness to peer deeply into the American soul which produces the superficial claims that more production, consumption, accumulation and defense spending will solve our ills at home and abroad. This is not to argue simplistic or utopian answers. The problems besetting us are complex. An ailing economy means unemployment and its demoralizing consequences for millions; it jeopardizes educational and retirement plans as inflation spirals; it engenders anger among the poor as they read of windfall profits by industries distributing the basic commodities they depend on to heat their homes and to feed their children, but which they can no longer afford. Complex questions will require well thought-out programs, programs which only the brightest and best trained minds of our country are capable of developing. The Church would be naive to recommend simplistic solutions. But what the Church must do is expose and subject to careful scrutiny the basic values and attitudes which motivate both those in positions of power and those who elect them, i.e., all of us in the republic.

THE UNPROPHETIC SILENCE IN OUR CHURCHES

Where greed, self-interest and elitism threaten or replace personal integrity and a sense of social justice, the Church must not be silent. Silence in the situation of broken covenant implies consent, and consent with ungodly acts is a sure sign of betrayal of the Church's responsibility. Silence nevertheless is a very common response among Christians today, even among those who share the dreadful sense that we are locked into a drift toward social decay. For many, silence stems from a sort of paralysis, a paralysis inflicted by inability to cope with the enormity and complexity of the problems. Success has been defined for us on the basis of a very perverse value system, one predicated on the maximizing of material gain, and the expected response is conditioned into us. When the economy threatens the customary standard of living, the reaction is to work longer hours, assign more child care to outsiders, take greater risks. When rising third world countries challenge our control over trade and commodities, we turn to armed force and our proud national symbols. And when the pinions of the proud eagle are broken, and we find the symbols of agent-orange and malfunctioning helicopters evoked in the minds of people when we mention our country abroad, our response is again the conditioned one: vastly increased military spending and reassertion of our nation's might.

Why this response? What does it say about our soul, both as individuals and as a republic? An adequate answer must account for these and similar anomalies: Most of us enjoy more material blessing than the vast majority of the population

of this world, yet we are unsatisfied in our craving. Collectively we possess the resources, technology and leadership to make a significant contribution to solving the monstrous problem of world hunger, thereby doing much to enhance the cause of peace, and yet we have made

accelerated production of weapons our top priority.

Are we all right in America? For the Church to reply yes, either by silence or by the ascribed exercise of civil religious ceremony, is to abdicate the prophetic tradition. And that tradition will be silenced and forgotten if we do not look squarely at the sin and greed which has dominated so much of our past, and which continues its ungodly march into the present. Only vivid memory of lives we have ruined by our greed through slavery, exploitation and denial of equal opportunity, health and well-being will keep alive the prophetic tradition of Amos, Jeremiah, Jesus, and in our own history, of Cotton Mather, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, W. E. B. DuBois, Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr. These critics of American sinfulness are not the least, but the most patriotic of our ancestors! For they can open our consciousness both to our underlying problems and to alternatives to the conditioned responses of more material gain and more deadly military hardware.

Only our loss of prophetic tradition, with its honest look at our past sin, can explain the profound malaise which pervades our lives and the sense of helplessness and dread which drives so many people to desperate and ultimately destructive remedies. From that tradition we learn that our lives lack an adequate grounding. The biblical foundation upon which our nation was based has been replaced with sand through a gradual erosion which has reached the extreme point at which collapse threatens us all.

It is a sad fact that the religious leaders of our land too often have succumbed to the temptation of contributing to cowardly silence and social paralysis in the face of injustice:

Pettigrew and Campbell concluded in 1957 that, despite the ardent dedication of some clergy and laity, the fear of loss of money and members would in fact in the long run determine the decision of the majority of the local clergy to return to their communal role of comforting, even though the challenge of injustice still obtained in the society and called for a response from the churches.⁵

As members of the religious mainstream and as preachers and teachers of the Church we have harbored a deep desire to look respectable in our society. We have made our contribution to civil order by sanctifying institutions and policies with our tacit or express approval. This is proper when national policies and institutions are committed to equality in our land and to international justice. But in a situation where the drift is toward protection of the have's against the claims of the have-not's, toward arrogant justification of our wasteful living habits, toward disassociation from the plight of the two-thirds of our world which lives below subsistence level, toward a militaristic approach to world diplomacy, it is both unpatriotic and unfaithful to add religious sanction to that drift. For the prophetic tradition teaches us that the erosion of righteousness assures a landslide to de-

⁵Marie Auguste Neal, S.N.D. deN., *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go: The Role of the First World Church Facing Third World Peoples* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 32.

struction. We must risk our civil respectability, if need be, and in cases even risk loss of members and support, to sound a warning from our pulpits that if policies predicated on narrow nationalism, individual and corporate greed, and self-righteous hubris are not replaced by a

vision of international justice and well-being, we face calamity on this small fragile globe. We may not be severely affected at once, but it is sheer blindness to deny that, left unchecked, the starvation and unrest which already engulf major parts of the world, and the growing gap between rich and poor nations, will foment an upheaval which one day will visit our comfortable neighborhoods as well.

THE BIBLE WITHIN THE CURRENT WORLD CRISIS AND THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH

We have now described our contemporary situation against the background of our nation's past. We have described it in terms of a crisis which has roots in a drift away from principles of justice and equality as selfish individualism and corporate greed have been justified as acceptable motivations for life. We have stated that a Church which is mindful of its prophetic heritage will not remain silent as the world slides ever closer to collapse. But what will the Church say to the current crisis, and on what authority?

We noted at the outset that there are two possible reactions to crisis. The former is denial of the seriousness of the crisis and arrogant self-justification: "Nothing basic is wrong with us. We've let the criticism of others lead us to self-doubt. We need only restore our self-confidence and redouble our efforts along the lines of our golden past: more production, more consumption, more wealth." We have asked whether the Church must not recognize from its heritage that this reaction is manifestation of a broken covenant, and as such must be described as national hubris, sinful denial of our brokenness. There are fortunately prophets and prophetesses who dare to draw the unpopular conclusions from our national record:

Neither the United States nor South Africa has been able to finance free health care, education and care for the elderly in all the years of affluence, yet China learned how to do it and to carry out what they learned for eight hundred million poor and alienated people in twenty-two years. The difference in performance is related to a difference in the perception of the worth of people. We learn our evaluations of people in our religious systems. They are informed by our theology.⁶

But there is a second possible response to crisis. And this constitutes a sublimely bright light in a very dark world. Our retrospective glance at our past pointed out to us a very poignant fact of life. Not primarily in moments of glory and pride, but in crises God has come to his people. When life has left them broken of their pride, conscious of their deep need, sorely aware of their own unworthiness and inability to save themselves, then they have been open to God's address.

This biblical heritage of ours, which sees beyond slavery the way to deliver-

⁶Neal, 26.

ance and beyond death the gateway to resurrection gives us as Christians a specific perspective from which to view the contemporary crisis. It also gives us a basis for critique of the arrogant reaction which is sweeping the nation. Though people suffering from shock may be lured into

goose-stepping with the call to nationalistic triumphalism, on a deeper level I believe there exists a deep suspicion that the call is based on an illusion. The Church has an urgent responsibility to address this intuition, to encourage a deeper probing, to support a realistic view of our situation which will accept the grave warnings of our times and even follow attentively the hands which are writing a death verdict on the walls of our institutions. We can encourage this frank realism because the Christian Gospel lets us look upon crisis with hope. Crisis is not minimized by this view. It is God's judgment on our past wantonness. It is a sign of broken covenant. But in the long history of God's relation with the human family, judgment has never been executed as an end in itself. It has always been subservient to a new plan, a redemptive plan. Therefore, in the present crisis as well, the decisive issue is *how* we respond, whether in cowardice or with courage and hope.

On the basis of its theology of exodus and cross, the Church has the only authentic word which is available to a foundering society. It is accordingly a mockery of God's truth to make our pulpits the transmitters of the propaganda of any human agency or the state. We are agents alone of the one God whose truth and whose righteousness cannot be co-opted. Away with the obsequiousness of a religious community which is so bereft of vision that it must take its signals from those sold to mammon or national hubris! Let the Church grasp the vision with which it has been entrusted, and let it preach of repentance *and* deliverance, slavery *and* deliverance, death *and* resurrection, in short, let it be true to a theology of the cross. This it can be, for its history and its identity are rooted in the dialectic at the center of life:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isa. 9:2)

“Wretched human that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25a)

We can therefore look squarely at the present national crisis and accept it as our darkness. We can accept the fact of our sin, our deadly sin. It is a sign of our brokenness. We can realistically look and accept because in our brokenness God comes to us, as God has to the broken and contrite in the past. Of the claims and prideful edifices of the arrogant, God has said: “What is this house which you would build for me?...” Of the meek and the broken God has said: “But upon this one I will look, the humble, who is broken in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:1 and 2).

As Christians we need not delude ourselves into believing that “everything's all right,” that we as a people are “okay.” We are able to be realistic about our present crisis because we are conscious of something beyond. God intends for us something better. That is why the efforts to soothe our anxieties with superficial reassurances leave our hearts unsatisfied. God intends a radically better world than this world with one-tenth of its population over-fed and two-thirds starving, a better planet than this once beautiful creation which is being

plundered and degraded into a polluted and ugly sphere by greedy mortals. God intends a community of shared wealth, equal opportunity, international harmony. God intends a Kingdom

of peace wedded with justice. That Kingdom entered through the death and resurrection of the One we continue to deny. But the portal is still open, and it is marked “repentance.”

Nothing will quiet the restless hearts of us as individuals or quiet our social tensions if we do not accept the brokenness of our covenant with God, and plead for renewal. Again we have the guidance of our biblical heritage. Repeatedly Israel spurned her God. And persistently God, through judgment, through the prophets, through defeat and exile, sought to win back the hearts of the people.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her....
And there she shall answer as in the days
of her youth, as at the time when she came out of
the land of Egypt (Hosea 2:14-15).

The way to rebirth and to the Kingdom of righteousness in the past has been the way of the wilderness and the cross. Our tradition prompts us to question those who offer assurances that the path which lies before us as individuals and as a society is a path to ever greener pastures. It is possible that we are entering a wilderness period. Facing an uncertain future, we must prepare ourselves to respond with courage and faithfulness. Unsatisfactory will be a message aimed at allaying fears at all costs, at soothing anxious hearts with cheap grace. It is time to ask whether God may not be leading us back into a wilderness, into a more severe, austere and quieter place, a place where we may be less hindered by material things and more appreciative of the basics of life, where we may become more aware of our solidarity with all other members of God’s family, where we may again be grasped by a vision of rebirth and recreation.

In admitting our need, confessing our brokenness and opening our lives to God’s direction our crisis, accepted as a necessary wilderness, can become the place of theophany. The Bible describes Israel’s return to the zero point with a rich repertory of metaphors, “wilderness,” “Sheol,” “out of the dust,” “Golgotha.” With their particular nuances, each explicates the good news of a God who reaches down to the point of deepest human need to heal, strengthen, restore, and, in a word, to be present. The reason why we as Christians must be uncompromising critics of all human institutions and policies is not because we love judgment and darkness, but because we seek to open up space in individuals, communities, and nations for God’s presence. We can look squarely into the darkness and can describe honestly the crisis because we see the newness which lies beyond. The long history of God’s faithful providence gives us a basis for a hope which no facile political or economic theory can equal.

The word which the Church is called upon to proclaim is thus both a word of judgment and of hope. And the authority upon which the word is based is that Word which has been entrusted to the community of faith by God since the time of Abraham. Our authority is a Word which has been transmitted by the faithful through the application of their vision of God’s Kingdom over the long history of the confessional heritage. We share in the responsibility of receiving this Word in

our time as well, being drawn by its vision of God’s Kingdom, being formed and transformed by

its symbols, and being grasped by the One who was so completely united with the Word as to become its incarnation in our world.

Every generation of the community of faith must engage anew in the task of receiving, interpreting and applying the Word of God to its world. The task is an awesome one. In the two developments we noted which grew out of our nation's early history, not only was the covenant betrayed through selfishness and greed, but the sacred symbols of exodus and chosen people were themselves perverted to unholy ends. Today as well the Bible is being interpreted by different groups in a wide diversity of ways, some of them, we fear, contradictory to the actual spirit of Scripture. The message intended by God for our time does not spring mechanically from its pages. It arises rather through a living process which I feel can occur only within a Church which is faithful to its calling as the ongoing covenanted people of God. Such a Church understands its mission as one of givenness to God's creative, redemptive purposes on behalf of the entire world. It confesses that the message for our time is drawn forth from it by God's Spirit in the midst of its life of scholarship, proclamation, and human care. In this mission it incarnates the living Word in the world, and can thereby understand itself as the Body of Christ in the world. In the imitation of Christ, it is a suffering Church, given to the poor and the broken at their points of need, with no regard to worthiness, creed, race, or nationality. God's purposes are universal: Christ's Body is given for all humans.

It is as a Servant Church, as Christ's Body in the world, that we can speak to the present crisis. Our proclamation need not mask over either the world's nor our own brokenness, for it is grounded in the brokenness of the cross. As a Church we need not triumphantly repress the criticism of those with other visions or the cries of those whom we as a nation have oppressed, for we ascribe to ourselves obedience and humble service, and ascribe triumph and glory alone to God.

Since the proclamation of this servant Church is a life-long vocation with many facets, each always related to the concrete setting being addressed, we cannot summarize it here. But we can suggest several themes in that message as they emerge from the interaction between God's Word and a world in the state of crisis which we have described.

The Church today, on the basis of its vision of a universal Kingdom inaugurated by Christ, can proclaim clearly and courageously a Word which is at once a word of judgment on all facile human solutions and a word of hope for all those who yearn for an enduring solution to the human dilemma: There is only *one* reliable foundation for life, both for life as individuals and for life as a nation. That foundation is revealed in Scripture. It is the one true living God. Only the life which is devoted solely to that Reality can respond to crisis with courage. Only the Church which is based on that one foundation can contribute to justice and peace in a fragile and threatened world. "You are the salt of the earth." The gathering of Christians in the world is to be God's agency in the world for arresting the drift toward calamity, for holding back God's judgment on a rebellious people. By its presence in the world it is to be a witness to the one truth which is God, and in this mission it carries on the vocation of ancient Israel: "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt. 6:4). When this radiant, divine center is restored to life, all the distractions which are ruining us as persons and making our nation a

curse on the earth are named for what they are: idols, false gods claiming our hearts and condemning us to death. Our craving for more and bigger material things is a false god. Our lust for power with which to assert our imperialistic intentions on the world is a false god. In the light of God's presence, these and all other cravings and lusts are exposed and judged, and only "I am the Lord your God" remains enthroned. Life drawn to the one true God and built upon the only reliable foundation is life in Covenant: "You shall be my people, and I will be your God." As individuals, we remember our baptismal covenant, and pray for renewal. As a nation we recall our national covenant with its qualities of justice and equality, and we pray for rebirth.

Life in covenant is life drawn into the purposes of God. It is giving up personal claims which drove us to idolatry. One claim alone binds the covenanted people, the self-transcending claim of God's Kingdom and God's righteousness. This is the only claim which does not lead to bondage, but which leads to the freedom of rebirth. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17). All need for arrogant self-assertion and prideful defensiveness is removed, for the New Creation is received solely as a gift: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself..." (II Cor. 5:18a). And through the new birth in Christ, life's purpose is set out as a carrying forth of God's initiating act of grace: "and (God) gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:18b).

Viewed from the perspective of the Bible, crisis and darkness come to be viewed as a threshold of hope for the individual and the community of faith which is reconciled to the one true God through covenant renewal and grateful acceptance of the ministry of reconciliation in the world. Now to return to our opening description of the contemporary crisis which threatens our world. We ask specifically what bearing this biblically-based message of the Church has on economics, global hunger, nuclear holocaust, and the like. The suggestion that a document from antiquity might have any bearing on such complex modern questions may seem to some an absurdity. We would lend credence to this suspicion if we as teachers and preachers of the Church were to offer simple-minded solutions to complicated economic, political and social questions. But we will not be naive at all if we fulfill our duty by drawing attention to a dimension of every individual life, as well as the life of our nation, from which decisions and programs dealing with such complicated problems arise, and which profoundly affects their quality: It is the dimension concerned with ultimate devotion. Here is a question which the Church must awaken within everyone, the mother and father as they raise tomorrow's citizens, the nuclear scientist as she weighs the implications of her research, the policymaker as he deals with the needs of the elderly, the poor and the dispossessed. The question is already written upon the heart of every human. The Church must raise it to the level of conscious decision, in order that people become critically aware of the motivating core of their personhood. This task the Church pursues with the promise that as scattered devotions are brought back to the one Reality deserving life's commitment, malaise and helplessness are transformed into courage and concern for justice, and with this trans-

formation, rather than with facile assurances, comes hope as the faithful dedicate themselves to a more just and peaceful future.

Christian individuals and the community of faith devote themselves to the cause of God's Kingdom without foreknowledge of the outcome of their actions. The Christian vocation is

obedience. Knowledge of results belongs to God. Christian freedom includes the freedom to act for the Kingdom without assurances about results, and with hope grounded solely in God's faithfulness. There is simply no way of predicting what could happen if large numbers of Christians became convicted by the contradiction between biblically-based principles of our "national creed" and the facts of life in our land today. Our founding documents, when interpreted in relation to Scripture, are truly *revolutionary* documents. The lofty ideals of Thomas Jefferson can put us to shame. The reform proposals based on our founding documents proposed by Orestes Brownson make our efforts at stewardship look pallid.⁷ Similarly, we have not begun to comprehend the practical implications of the biblical laws regulating the right of patrimony and the observance of the Jubilee year. Modern programs dedicated to justice and equality would not be carbon copies of biblical institutions, but by embodying the redemptive dynamic which gave birth to those ancient institutions, a dynamic infused by far *more* power by the Reality of Christ, such programs would infuse new hope and direction into a broken and foundering society.

To whom is a human being committed? To an idol? Or to the one true God? Many are the ways in which this question pertaining to idolatry and true devotion can be stated, as the Church addresses different individuals, evaluates different programs, and clarifies its positions to the nation in crisis. But if the Church is to avoid becoming a mere lackey of civil religion, subservient to the State and to those in positions of power regardless of their interpretation of human rights, if the Church is to live true to its prophetic tradition and to its only Lord, it must not forget that it deals with decisions which if neglected or wrongly answered will lead the nation and world from the present crisis into holocaust. At issue are decisions regarding covenant betrayal or covenant renewal, selfish greed or self-transcending service, power and privilege or justice and equality, slavery or freedom, death or resurrection, idolatry or the one true God.

⁷Brownson's taking the principle of equality seriously led him to propose the abolishment of inheritance as the only means by which people in our country could begin life with equal opportunity. Bellah, 118-20.