

FACE TO FACE

God's Work? Our Hands?

An Introduction

“God’s work. Our hands,” has become a significant part of the “brand” of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The meaning of this “tagline” was spelled out by then Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson in an article in *The Lutheran* in October 2008.* In summary, Hanson wrote: “We do God’s work, not because God needs us to do so, but because our neighbor does. We do God’s work in Christ’s name for the life of the world.” In this Face to Face feature, well-known Old Testament theologians Walter Brueggemann and Terry Fretheim play off the ELCA’s tagline to carry on their ongoing debate or discussion about divine sovereignty and human agency. The authors are not specifically addressing the ELCA’s tagline, but making their own case(s) for their understanding of a key element of biblical theology.

*See http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=7457&key=55606847 (accessed April 8, 2015).

God's Work? Our Hands? The Two Who Tango

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

It is a curious wonderment that we have found it possible for so long to set in tension—or contrast or conflict—“God’s work” and “our hands.” That tension is nowhere more vigorous than in setting Paul over against the Letter of James. Such a tension is a misunderstanding that would have been avoided had we been able to take more seriously the deeply dialogical character of evangelical faith, the intimate and passionate linkage between God and God’s partner, so that each is in relation with and therefore “relative” to the other.¹ In authentic dialogic work, the work of creator and creature, the task is a slow, steady summons to both parties, putting both parties at risk and bringing both parties to deep joy. God and God’s partner, in edgy fidelity, are like sail and sea, like dancer and partner, like the dream and the dreamer; sorting out the merit and achievement of one or the other is next to impossible in this performance of fidelity.²

It is a particular misfortune that the Epistle of James got “slotted” with reference to “works.” Even given its didactic urgency, such a reading of the epistle must, perforce, skip over a great deal. I have simply summarized the places in the letter where God operates as the subject of active verbs. God does indeed do God’s work in the letter, though not to the diminishment of human hands and human work. Thus:

- God *gives* (1:5, 18; 4:6);
- God *promises* the crown of life to those who love him (1:12);
- God *yearns* jealously (4:5);
- God *draws near* (4:8);
- God *raises up* the sick (5:15).

Two notes concerning “God’s work” strike me. In 2:5, it is written: “Has not God chosen the poor in world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” This remarkable assertion is an anticipation of the belated mantra of liberation theology, concerning “God’s preferential option for the poor.” The cards of creation are stacked before any human effort concerning the reordering of the economy. While the letter bids specific actions, here it is much more programmatic concerning God’s large intentionality. And in 5:11, in the con-

¹On “partners,” see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 407–564.

²See Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass* (New York: Vintage, 1985) 476–477.

(continued on page 288)



God's Work? Our Hands? Issues of Agency: A Canonical Reading

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

How we think about issues of agency in the Bible will be sharply affected by how we portray the God of the creation accounts. What if the God of these Genesis chapters is imaged as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship, thereby setting a pattern for all that follows?

The Bible begins with God as the sole subject of the action: God created the heavens and the earth. But the text immediately makes clear that God chooses to involve creatures, both human and nonhuman, in ongoing creational work: "Let the earth put forth...and the *earth* brought forth" (Gen 1:11–12). The creation of human beings is a dialogical process involving beings that are not God ("let us," 1:26) and humans are created in the image of such a God. God's first words to the newly created human are power-sharing words: "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion" (1:28). These words reveal God's *commitment to interdependence* in ongoing relationships with the world. That direction of God's work is signaled by God's evaluative language in 2:18: "it is *not* good." This divine move draws human beings into a creative process whereby the world *becomes* good in and through *human* choices of names for the animals.

These opening chapters of the Bible are revealing of a highly relational God. What does this mean? In this relationship God has chosen not to be the only character of consequence. God gives responsibilities to human and nonhuman creatures, and in such a way that *commits* God to a certain kind of relationship with them. God chooses to exercise a kind of sovereignty that gives genuine power to the creatures for the sake of a relationship of integrity. God does not manage their activity, intervening to make sure every little thing goes right. At the same time, this way of relating to creatures reveals a divine vulnerability, for God opens the divine self up to hurt should things not go according to the divine plan (as in Gen 6:6). In the wake of those events, God makes promises and limits the divine options for action in relating to sin and evil (8:21–22).

In this creational way of interdependence, God sets a pattern for interpreting the Bible's description of God's ongoing ways of working in and with the world. Or, in other words, following the creational pattern, God acts directly, but always through means. The variety of means in and through which God works is impressive. Some examples: God works through human language to call Abraham and Moses;

(continued on page 289)

text of a bid for patience, it is asserted that “The Lord is compassionate and merciful,” and has a “purpose” on which the faithful rely.

To these we may add the twice used phrase “from above” (1:17; 3:17), which surely attests a purpose well beyond human intentionality.³ Given its didactic accent, the letter attests the deep active agency of God that sways the world. There is enough here to preclude any simple reductionism to “human hands.” I judge that his dialogic sketch must always be kept in purview, even while we appreciate the accent on “human hands.” The tilt one way or the other is an act of pastoral hermeneutical attentiveness in any particular circumstance. Indeed, circumstance requires a contextual tilt one way or the other, with the endless temptation to absolutize a tilt from one circumstance so that it is made to apply to every circumstance. Thus, Calvin (after Luther) had to resist too much Roman Catholic “works,” and so tilted greatly toward God’s work. On the other hand, Wesley, in an English economy grown indifferent to the plight of the poor, had to make a very different tilt. But neither Calvin nor Luther nor Wesley wanted to disregard the dialogic requirement of both/and. Every necessary interpretive tilt requires redress concerning dialogic engagement.

Over time, I have disputed with Terry Fretheim on this matter, he stressing human agency, my own accent on God as subject of active verbs. I have no doubt that Fretheim and I agree finally about the dialogic character of faith that requires both/and. My tilt toward God’s work may be, as Fretheim thinks, because of my Calvinist rootage. I think rather more likely it is because my life has been situated among theological “liberals” (progressives) who are offended at any “supernatural” claim and who really believe that God “has no hands but our hands.” Such a progressive wants to hone the gospel to manageable Enlightenment rationality that prefers no intellectual embarrassment. The claim of theological liberalism is matched, moreover, by a culture of technological self-sufficiency that seeks to dispel mystery and wants to deny any agency other than our own.

Clearly, “our way” of obedience in the epistle is set in a context of God’s purpose “from above” that is marked by “compassion and mercy,” and that pivots on the *choosing* of the poor. In that context the church is called to an urgent, disciplined obedience in the economy that is in “our hands.” Every interpreter and every pastor must articulate this dialogic mystery in a particular context that always compels a tilt one way or the other. The tilt, however, is always corrected by the insistence of dialogic engagement. The will “from above” is always present, a will that the tradition declares to be effective, even when it offends our present sensibility. ⊕

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³The word is the same is in the more familiar usage of John 3:3, 7.

through nonhuman agents at the Red Sea and in the wilderness; through sacrificial rituals to mediate forgiveness of sin; through non-Israelite kings and armies to effect both judgment and salvation; through the created moral order wherein acts have consequences. God is certainly a key agent in these stories, but God does not act alone. God works in and through an amazing variety of agents.

In the important biblical work of Walter Brueggemann, issues of relationship and agency arise in various contexts. I cite several. He uses the word “partner” with reference to the divine-human relationship (see his accompanying Face to Face essay); indeed, with regard to the exodus events, God “*depends on* the complete obedience and daring of Moses and Aaron.”¹ Even more, “God is a crucial agent in the story of liberation, *but is second and not first.*”² I have sometimes emphasized non-divine agency in view of an all-too-common talk in the discipline wherein non-divine agency is sharply diminished or eliminated altogether.³ In some other studies, Brueggemann will take a different direction on this issue. For example, he claims that in the actions of judgment in book of Jeremiah God is the only “real agent,” or there is “no mediating agent,” or “the army may be Babylonian, but the real agent is Yahweh.”⁴ His conclusion is even more striking: such divine judgmental actions witness to “a complete absence of fidelity on God’s part” to the covenant.⁵

These differences may testify to Brueggemann’s language in the accompanying article that agency “tilts” in one direction or another depending upon the context. I think his “tilt” language has promise, but I wonder whether it gives sufficient recognition to the kind of exclusionary theological moves he makes at times regarding agency. In the Jeremiah example, human agency seems to be eliminated altogether, or least is much more than a “tilt.”

In sum, consideration of God’s work in and through agents must steer between two ditches. God neither remains ensconced in heaven watching the world go by nor does God micromanage the world to control its moves so that creaturely agency counts for little or nothing. Between these two ditches, there is more than one place for God and agents to stand. But neither ditch will do. ☩

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¹See Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 740.

²Ibid., 707n.

³See Terence E. Fretheim, “Issues of Agency in Exodus,” in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 591–609.

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For these and other examples see pp. 54, 176, 193, 430, 439.

⁵Ibid., 152.