

THEOLOGICAL METHOD FOR EVERYBODY

By Charles W. Allen

THIS IS AN exploratory essay on theological method for nonspecialists. In effect, it presents theological method as a set of spiritual exercises to be cultivated over an entire lifetime. I have tried to keep technical jargon and references to a minimum in hopes of making the essay look less forbidding. To make it more engaging I have also resorted to addressing you, the reader, almost exclusively in the second person. The reading is still fairly demanding, I'm afraid, but perhaps no more so than a good many works on other forms of spirituality.

Theological method really is for everybody. Perhaps that sounds exaggerated. You may think I mean that books like Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* or David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order* or George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* should be required reading for everybody. But I don't mean that. These books are only one version of theological method. Profiting from them requires some degree of specializing. But theological method is too important to be left to specialists. For underneath the forbidding jargon specialists tend to use are some very practical questions.

For example, surely anyone who bears witness to Jesus Christ, and anyone who hears it, needs to ask what to make of the different responses it provokes. If the witness is mostly ignored should it be changed? If it's mostly embraced should it be left alone? Do some people's responses (e.g., the educated, the conscientious, the oppressed) deserve more attention than others? Or (as seems more likely) what if people's responses cannot automatically confirm or refute the witness? Then what do they indicate? Nothing? (For me that would be going too far.) Though questions like these seem to provoke virtually endless debate, that does not make them any less urgent. Christians trying to live their faith with eyes open and ears unplugged have to forge some sort of working relationship with them every day. And precisely in such an ongoing and precarious task we find a "working theological method" already taking shape (cf. Farley).

If we fail to notice how we are already engaged in theological method we are not likely to appreciate what more specialized efforts can contribute or, just as importantly, what they cannot. They can inform your working

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theological method, but they cannot replace it. Simply to recognize how their efforts *might* inform yours (not to mention determining how they do inform), you have to reinterpret them in terms of your own working method. Even specialists have to do this. Living moment by moment like the rest of us, they too must rely mostly on a working theological method which their professional life can inform but never supplant (cf. Gadamer: 283; Allen). And also like the rest of us, at this most fundamental, moment-by-moment work they can be as inept as the greenest novice (cf. Schön: 16-17). Indeed, what they are most likely to have acquired from their specialized inquiries is an ever more vivid sense of how precarious everyone's footing turns out to be. That in itself is no mean accomplishment, but it will disappoint those who look for specialists to step in and lift them out of their perplexity.

I am writing here as one more specialist, but one who is at least fairly mindful of the extent of his own ineptitude. I want eventually to formulate a cluster of questions which I believe we already ask ourselves--though we may not always notice--whenever we try to live our faith with eyes open and ears unplugged. I am trying, in other words, to formulate questions which already constitute your working theological method at its best, though of course we may disagree over when it really is at its best. I am therefore also inviting you to formulate your own account of lived faith at its best moments and to compare it with mine. You may then find it necessary to disagree with me, but even if the disagreement is sharp I will have accomplished a major part of my aim, which is precisely to cultivate this sort of critical comparison. I won't have supplanted your working theological method, but I will have informed it--and provoked you to inform yourself more about it, which is even better. And if you should wind up more perplexed about what you are doing than you were before reading this, that may not be such a bad thing. Chronic perplexity can be healthy as long as it doesn't paralyze you. (That is admittedly one of my convictions about lived faith at its best, so if you disagree you won't find it very helpful--not yet, at least.) I will have failed altogether only if my formulations strike you as so familiar and obvious as to need no further reflection. I doubt that they will.

I want to begin with a rubric which I am convinced could function as an apt description of lived faith, theology, and theological method alike. (Actually, I am most uncertain where one pursuit ends and another begins, and have yet to

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be persuaded by those who seem more certain.) All of these can be described as *a radical witness cultivating comparable witnesses*. This is simply a peculiar rendition of the venerable phrase, "faith seeking understanding." I have my reasons for resorting to a less felicitous wording here, one of the most important being my conviction that we need to pay constant attention to the ways in which all these pursuits require developing a variety of relationships with a variety of people and institutions (cf. Toulmin). To put it another way, I know of no intellectual or spiritual pursuit which can get anywhere without some sort of political engagement. I don't mean by this that everything reduces to politics. My point is expansive, not reductive. Politics can be more intellectual and spiritual than most North Americans imagine. Aristotle was not far off in saying that people are by nature political animals (Aristotle: I.2.10). So among animals such as these faith seeks understanding by bearing radical witness and by cultivating comparable witnesses.

Bearing Radical Witness

You bear witness, minimally, whenever you share how something or other has claimed your attention (e.g., a traffic accident). In other cases (e.g. a worthy cause) the witness you bear is somewhat more engaged, conveying how the claim on your attention has also made some claim on your loyalty and trust. Bearing a radical witness takes your engagement still further. Here whatever claims your attention claims your most radical loyalty and trust--a loyalty and trust which, it seems, cannot be outweighed by any known or seriously conceivable rival. This is a form of engagement in which all your other engagements seem *rooted*, which is what makes them "radical" (i.e., "of, relating to, or proceeding from a root") in the original sense of the term (cf. H. R. Niebuhr: 16, 31ff).

By all appearances people bear radical witness more or less consistently in a number of ways. I do, in any case. For example, when I say that my life and yours somehow matter regardless of what happens, I seem to bear one sort of radical witness. When I say that God is with us in Jesus Christ, I seem to bear another sort. When I acknowledge an obligation to face any further questions which might arise about *why* I should bear such witnesses, I seem to bear still another. And the same can be said for my commitment (such as it is) to help bring about a world where all such witnesses could flourish in community with others. Now for me all these ways of bearing radical witness have become so

closely intertwined that I can't make full sense of any one of them without drawing upon the others. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that they all amount to exactly the same witness, or that I didn't experience any tension (or at least a little disorientation) in moving from one to another. This apparently irreducible, restless diversity will prove important later on.

I can speak of all these witnesses in terms of ideas to which I subscribe. But those terms hardly suffice. However much bearing these witnesses involves subscribing to certain ideas, they are nevertheless ideas *about* something more than just themselves. Furthermore, these are definitely more than opinions I just happen to hold. They seem already to hold me as much as I could ever hold them. (Here is a case, we might say, where my ideas aren't entirely my idea.) They have gained my most radical loyalty and trust not just because I up and decided to give it to them but, more importantly, because they have repeatedly *claimed* it from me. This explodes any illusions I might have had about these convictions being my own private property. To be sure, when I bear radical witness I am always sharing how *my* loyalty and trust have been claimed, not someone else's, but in so doing I am always bearing witness to more than just myself.

This brings us to the first of several questions to incorporate into your working theological method. Please note: just because this question comes first in this presentation doesn't mean it should always be the first one to ask yourself. It is better in practice to become familiar with *all* of these questions *together*, and to keep them all in mind when focusing on a particular one. Though you may think it superfluous, one of the questions you should always keep in mind is

What radical witness do I bear?

You need to keep this question in mind, because the answer may not be as obvious or settled as you think. Without fully realizing it, you may be more of a Jungian than the Christian you presumably claim to be--or more of an American yuppie than either. There is ample room for self-deception here, as with any question that comes so close to home. And even if you are as honest with yourself as any of us can be, there is still no guarantee that the variety of ways in which you seem to bear radical witness will all fit together as smoothly as you would like. Some thinkers actually seem to prefer ongoing "paradoxical," "metaphorical," "dialectical" or "analogical" tensions to systematic tidiness (cf. Gilkey; McFague; Ricoeur; Tracy, 1981). So just how smoothly these ways of bearing witness *should* fit together is hardly a settled question, though most

agree that *some* kind of unity is desirable as long as it isn't forced. Finally, while you can easily distinguish between a radical witness and a superficial one, you are likely to find it practically impossible to distinguish with any certainty between a radical witness and a near-radical one. For example, does the radicality of my witness to Jesus Christ as God-with-us imply an equally radical loyalty and trust regarding certain ways (whether classical or present-day) of conceiving *how* this person's life can make such a claim on me? Or are all these conceptualizations at most near-radical witnesses? (If you think the answer is easy here, you may not have noticed that my use of "Jesus Christ as God-with-us" is itself one of those conceptualizations, albeit a fairly elastic one.)

Asking this question is inevitably perplexing, but there is no need to be paralyzed by it. I actually find it enlivening. And there are more questions which can help you live non-defensively with this one. Here, for example, is a further question which can help you muddle your way toward answering the first:

Is this witness radically inescapable?

That is, is it so inescapable that you are unable to explore why you bear this witness without somehow continuing to bear it? If you find yourself unable to do so, chances are good this is a radical witness. It stands to reason why this is so. You cannot even begin to be self-critical without a more radical trust in and loyalty to something or other that makes self-criticism a worthwhile effort. So whatever that "something or other" is thought to be, even your most searching questions will bear witness to it, at least indirectly.

Some people (say, fans of Karl Popper's version of scientific method) may be content here to bear witness rather vaguely to a world in which improvement comes only through relentless self-criticism (Munz: 241). But Christians cannot help somehow identifying such a world with God-with-us in Jesus Christ. In doing this they may seem to be carrying extra baggage which the supposedly more tough-minded can do without. The Christian witness may indeed seem to provoke further questions which would not arise if we stuck to a vaguer witness. But it compensates for this greater vulnerability by providing a much more vivid portrayal of a world where self-criticism and self-fulfillment work together.

In any case, what finally matters is whether Christians find themselves somehow bearing witness to Jesus Christ as God-with-us even when they set out to question that very witness. It is this witness, nothing vaguer, which seems most to animate my own best efforts at self-criticism. So if I am right

about this, I have at least one good reason, though still a disputable one, to regard my witness to Jesus Christ as genuinely radical.

A further question complements the immediately preceding one:

Is this witness radically non-defensive?

That is, are you as willing to face unexpected questions about why you should bear this witness as you are to continue bearing it? We have just seen that a truly radical witness won't let you go even when you set out to question it. You may wonder, then, how it differs from an obsession. As you might suspect, there is no fool-proof way to tell the difference, but this further question can remind you to watch for a telltale clue: a radical witness's hold on you won't make you defensive. It won't make you fearful of questions you hadn't expected. Again, it is fairly easy to explain why. Defensiveness reveals a less-than-radical trust. Remember, when your trust is radical the possibility of its ever being uprooted is not one you can seriously entertain, except, perhaps, as an "impossible possibility" (more about that later). How then could you be fearful of what further questioning might suggest? So if your trust is as radical as you claim, you can expect your willingness to face unexpected questions to be equally radical.

Now you mustn't confuse willingness with eagerness here. You don't have to go out of your way to find new questions to face unless that is part of your special vocation. You don't have to resolve every question you face either.

Who ever could? Nevertheless, when unexpected questions do come your way you can't turn your back on them or try to suppress them without denying your witness's radicality. You have no choice but to face them. You must pay attention to them and respond with nothing more (or less) forceful than the witness you still must bear, along with the best insights you currently have as to why you must bear it. Obviously you can't stop everything in order to do this. Still, at least in the back of your mind you can keep a lively interaction going between these questions and such responses as you can provide while pursuing whatever else your witness most urgently requires.

Cultivating Comparable Witnesses

Whether you have noticed it or not, becoming more mindful of the radical witness you bear has already started you down the path of cultivating comparable witnesses. You begin to cultivate comparable witnesses whenever you acknowledge variety in the ways you bear radical witness, whenever you

admit the absence of a sharp boundary separating radical witnesses from near-radical ones, and especially whenever you face unexpected questions (the flip side of comparable witnesses) without defensiveness. To be sure, this is only a beginning, but one already well enough underway that by now you can hardly turn back from it.

And just what are comparable witnesses? They can be any witnesses which seem in any way capable of informing your own radical witness, whether by supporting, challenging, or even flatly contradicting it. At their most obvious they will be witnesses borne by others which either you or they take to be at least as radical as yours--say, a Buddhist celebrating Absolute Nothingness, a self-styled intellectual passionately defending dispassionate inquiry from the wishful thinking he sees in religious convictions, or a member of your own congregation trying to explain what Christian baptism means to her. But comparable witnesses don't have to be borne by others, and how radical they might or might not be can remain unsettled. If you find yourself bearing radical witness in different ways, and if those different ways seem somehow to inform each other (and how could they not?), then you can also consider them comparable witnesses. And if you find your radical witness even remotely informed by any of your less deeply held opinions, you may count them as comparable witnesses too. (An example might be your favoring a certain New Testament scholar's historical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. Your faith in Jesus Christ probably wouldn't waver if you eventually found flaws in that portrait. Still, it's somehow informative, isn't it?) The same holds, of course, for less radical witnesses that others seem to bear. Comparable witnesses are simply *any* witnesses which can be compared *in any way* with your own. As best I can tell, that means any witness whatsoever.

In recent years there has been considerable debate in a variety of scholarly circles over whether anyone can get away with such a sweeping claim as I have just made. Some people believe the only way I could get away with claiming that any witness is somehow comparable to mine is by appealing to some fixed system of classification which would tell me just *how* each witness is comparable. Many of them would want me to go on and defend such a system, but a growing number of others (convinced that no such system can be had) would want me to stop claiming any comparability for witnesses beyond my own community's. I am going to disappoint both these groups. As I mentioned earlier, there are also prominent thinkers who seem to be saying that making sense of the virtually endless variety of human witnesses involves some sort of

living tension which could never be reduced to one static, formal system. (No doubt it is appropriate that when you ask these thinkers how such a tension should be characterized you may find a similar tension at work in the variety of answers they give you.) I am casting my lot with this third, more restless group of thinkers. When I say that any witness I know of is somehow comparable to mine, I quite readily admit at the same time that with a good many witnesses I hardly even begin to know just how they might be comparable. I only know that they *somehow* are, because I dimly sense something in them which seems suggestive for how I might continue to bear my own radical witness. And this is all I need to know in order to begin cultivating them.

Cultivating comparable witnesses is practically the same as facing unexpected questions non-defensively, the difference being that now we are focusing on the affirmations which underlie those unexpected questions. As you become mindful of the radical witness you bear you will be cultivating comparable witnesses to some extent, even if you live by yourself on a desert island. The moment-by-moment experience of even a lifetime hermit would be varied enough in itself to introduce an unpredictable variety into that person's radical witness, and from that variety a number of unexpected questions would eventually become too insistent to ignore. But most of us aren't hermits—even hermits weren't always hermits. Some of the unexpected questions we face come from our own semi-private experience, but most of them (usually the most informative ones) arise from our ongoing interaction with other people bearing their own radical witnesses. Facing unexpected questions non-defensively must, when possible, include facing those who provoke them in a similar way. (They, after all, are where the *really* unexpected questions originate. They also can see implications in your witness which you can't on account of being so involved in it—a service which you can render them as well.) This is precisely why (as I said earlier) faith seeking understanding requires cultivating a variety of relationships with a variety of people and institutions. Cultivating comparable witnesses in the fullest practical sense requires no less.

This is just as urgent a demand as any other your radical witness makes of you. Still, it is not the only demand, which is a point people like me can too often forget (or repress). To be sure, your witness's other, equally urgent demands must not prevent your cultivating comparable witnesses, but the reverse is also true. As David Tracy points out, there are two sayings which both academics and activists need to keep side by side. One, borrowed from Socrates, is, "The unreflective life is not worth living." The other, borrowed

from classical Buddhism, is, "The unlived life is not worth reflecting upon" (Tracy, 1987: 113). Perhaps there is an unavoidable tension in trying to live by both these sayings at once, but if there is, it is up to you and me to make it a productive tension.

Since you have to live your life just as much as reflect upon it, you have to cultivate comparable witnesses in a way that fits *your* life, and not just human life in general. So you might try asking

What comparable witnesses *most* require *my* cultivating?

To set fixed limits to cultivating comparable witnesses--limits beyond which you will not go--would be a symptom of defensiveness. It is not defensive, however, to identify where your work must begin. The witnesses which *most* require *your* cultivating will be those whose interaction with yours would seem to make the most significant difference to all involved. Without pretending to be exhaustive, let me suggest several, sometimes overlapping types.

The most obvious witnesses which qualify here would be those which seem most directly to awaken or confirm your own. Assuming you bear radical witness to Jesus Christ as God-with-us, they would include any other witnesses through which this living presence seems to have claimed you most decisively (cf. Tracy, 1981: 248-338). These witnesses in all their variety might as well be called *canonical*, because together they function for you as Holy Writ even if they are not all found between the pages of your Bible. Of course, any such witnesses which *are* found in that originating collection we call Scripture will become the means by which you identify any others, but this is not to say that later witnesses are any less decisive, so long as the same living presence seems to claim you through them. Some of these may not even bill themselves as Christian witnesses. Scriptural witnesses are available to us because a variety of living traditions stemming from them have continued to cultivate them even while adding their own distinctive voices to that cluster. Many of those voices can still be heard in today's Christian communities, and your witness is itself a lively continuation of one or more of those traditions. Though there is irreducible variety in these witnesses, all of them taken together (yours included) seem to confirm, more than challenge, one another (though their variety is always somewhat challenging).

Alongside these canonical witnesses are others which may prove just as significant but which presently seem more challenging to your witness than supportive of it. Call them *deutero-canonical* witnesses. These witnesses also make a significant claim on your loyalty and trust, but you are presently

uncertain about how radical that claim is or how it should influence the radical witness you already bear. (Some of them may even seem flatly to contradict your witness, which makes their comparable claim on you puzzling, to say the very least. Think again of the Buddhist's affirmation of Nothingness as the source of all being.) Respected witnesses which profess to be something other than Christian probably come most readily to mind here, but they can also be found wherever you find canonical witnesses--even in the Bible itself. If Paul's letters have most decisively awakened or confirmed your own radical witness, you are bound to find a few passages in the Gospel Matthew which perplex, though they may be compelling in their own way. Sometimes even the same passage, given a different reading, will become more challenging than confirming. Think of how a rabbi reciting "You shall have no other gods before me" can suddenly change the way you hear that text.

Just as important as canonical and deuterocanonical witnesses are *neglected* witnesses--those which you ought to have heard, but haven't yet. There are of course countless witnesses which you in particular are not obliged to hear (even if they deserve somebody's hearing), either because you can't have heard them yet or because hearing them justly would require you to suspend your more urgent practical demands. These are *not* what I mean by neglected witnesses. Neglected witnesses are those which you *could* have heard before now; you have had nothing more important to do; still, you just haven't heard them. (Or perhaps you have, but have fooled yourself into thinking you haven't.) Political and liberation theologians have been particularly helpful in uncovering some of the most shamefully neglected witnesses in our own day (cf. Chopp). Ironically, these are often victims of what have seemed to be some of Western culture's most heroic efforts to improve the human condition. Those of us who have participated in any way in those efforts (as you definitely have, if you are reading this chapter) had better pay attention to at least some of the voices these theologians have uncovered. But you mustn't stop at that, and you particularly mustn't let listening for the neglected voices of Western history prevent you from hearing the neglected voices of *your* particular history (a point which liberation theologians have stressed often enough). Think of how often you have failed to notice or too hastily judged the depth of faith and intellect in some member of your congregation (or some member of your family). You won't know exactly which voices these are, of course, until they are no longer so neglected. But by now past experience should have taught you that a good many are still around, waiting for the attention they deserve especially from

you.

There are also witnesses which require your immediate attention because they seem downright *oppressive*. As best you can tell, they are not just unsettling or provocative (as deuterocanonical and even some canonical witnesses are), and they certainly won't let you neglect them. Instead, whether overtly or covertly, they seem bent on overriding or twisting the give-and-take of cultivating comparable witnesses in order to secure their own exclusive advantage. Once again, these witnesses can be found practically anywhere. Unless you are the most rabid sort of inerrantist (a witness I obviously find oppressive), you will easily find oppressive witnesses borne in the Bible itself. The same collection of books which in one place paints a vision of lions lying down beside lambs in other places has God commanding genocide. And the same Apostle who at one point pronounced gender discrimination obsolete seems elsewhere to have done his best to keep women silent. You should also have little trouble finding oppressive *aspects* even in witnesses you have taken to be canonical. You may find "Jesus is Lord" an essentially liberating witness, but the ease with which others have invoked it to silence challenging witnesses suggests that the phrase itself may not be wholly without blame. (Perhaps what Martin Luther said of Christians applies to their witnesses as well--they may remain sinful even when justified [Luther: 130].) So-called secular witnesses can be just as likely to oppress. As social critic Walter Benjamin has aptly remarked, every product of what we call civilization is at the same time a product of barbarism (Benjamin: 256). Oppression seems so pervasive a temptation for all of us that we need to be constantly on the lookout for witnesses which are likely to encourage it.

Finally (as far as this typology is concerned), we mustn't forget *tiresome* witnesses--those which, frankly, bore you to tears, but which you encounter too frequently to ignore for long. There is always the hopeful possibility, of course, that your boredom is a symptom of neglect, so that a little more attention will eventually bring these witnesses to life. But you can't rule out the further possibility that some witnesses seem tiresome because they really are. People preoccupied with formality in worship can certainly bear a tiresome witness, though often as not I find people calling for more spontaneity just as tiresome. (Why are their ideas of spontaneity so predictable?) Complaints about the church being full of hypocrites are boring too, as are "inspiring" talks about what a nice guy Jesus was (and how much better the world would be if we all tried to be that nice). And every honest reader knows how boring the Bible can

be (though never as boring as some people's doctrines about it). Why don't we just admit that most of us are pretty tiresome most of the time? Surely we need to attend to this truth about ourselves as much as anything else (tiresome as *that* may sound).

As I have been outlining this rough typology, you have probably begun already to consider the next question:

How shall I cultivate these witnesses?

Much depends, of course, on how you continue to wrestle with the previous question. Different types of witness call for different types of cultivating. For the sake of continuity I'll indicate how the typology I have just outlined can suggest your initial response to each type of witness. But first a word of caution is in order. You definitely need some way of sorting witnesses into different types, and there ought to be some sort of progression in whatever typology you develop or borrow. But *workable typologies need to remain simple, adaptable, and provisional*. If you become too concerned for detail, too rigid in your application, or too exclusive in loyalty to a particular typology, you'll just be spinning your wheels. The point of using a typology here is simply to suggest some idea of what to do *for the moment* with a certain witness, where sometimes it's better just to go ahead and do what seems called for and save questions about how this does or doesn't fit some typology for later.

How, for the moment, should you cultivate canonical witnesses? Typically, because you basically can't help it, you will begin by celebrating and sharing them. It is no accident that Christians' corporate worship reflects this sort of response. But since even canonical witnesses vary enough to prove somewhat challenging you cannot rest content with celebrating and sharing. Eventually you will have to start exploring some of the questions they will inevitably provoke. If you don't your response may turn either tiresome or oppressive.

There is no reason why cultivating deuterocanonical witnesses should not also involve some celebration and sharing. Since, however, you will ordinarily recognize them by the perplexing questions they raise, it will be best to begin by facing those questions nondefensively. (You begin, in other words, where you eventually wind up in responding to canonical witnesses.) As I said earlier, this will involve listening respectfully to these more challenging witnesses and responding with the witness you still must bear, along with your best insights into why you bear it. This sort of interaction is still a way of cultivating comparable witnesses. For even when strong disagreements develop

(as they inevitably do), the result is that each of the witnesses involved gets further, serious attention.

Neglected witnesses have the perplexing characteristic that the only ones you know about are those which are no longer so neglected. The only practical way to cultivate them seems to be keeping your interaction with all sorts of comparable witnesses open-ended and elastic enough that the neglected ones get at least some opportunity to gain your attention. Almost anything that makes you more aware of your surroundings (or yourself) can help here--learning more about other cultures, re-reading parts of the Bible you tend to skip, treating your parishioners more as colleagues than clients, discovering (often with a therapist's help) where you tend most often to respond too hastily to what you haven't yet understood adequately, and so on. Especially pertinent are periodic reappraisals of witnesses previously judged oppressive or tiresome.

Any of these activities can put you in a position where neglected witnesses are more likely to get through to you. But their finally reaching you is as unpredictable (and often as unsettling) as falling in love. Something has to happen which makes you either notice them for the first time or else reassess your earlier judgments about them. "Grace" is not an inappropriate word to describe such events.

Your initial response to oppressive witnesses must always take some form of resistance. By "resistance," however, I don't mean a defensive reaction. I don't mean refusing to face such a witness or trying to silence it. I do mean saying and doing whatever you can (and whatever your own witness permits) to counter its most oppressive effects. For the most part this will involve calling people's attention to the witness and explaining why you suspect its claim must be refused. And note, even this will involve your cultivating the witness in an odd sort of way (though obviously not the way those who bear it would like to see it cultivated). For by calling attention to it you are in effect making its survival more likely. Besides, even your most vehement resistance, if truly nondefensive, must leave open the possibility, however remote, that certain themes peculiar to the witness might still be worth recovering. There may actually be ways to transform this witness into its own sharpest critic. Without relaxing your watchfulness in the least, you will want to encourage such efforts to "heal" or "deideologize" the witness.

Tiresome witnesses likewise call for strategies of resistance and transformation. You must refuse to let their tiresomeness lull you into a bored complacency, and you must search for ways to make your interaction with them

more lively. That in itself may seem a tiresome enough task. All I can say is that eventually it does seem to pay off, though not nearly as often as any of us would like.

Be reminded once again that typologies of this sort do little more than suggest your initial response to witnesses whose interaction with yours would seem to make the most difference to all concerned. Beyond that initial response you simply have to wait and see what happens and respond according to what you take to be your best insights into what is happening. As your interaction with comparable witnesses continues you will be led to consider one more question which, in effect, brings your working theological method full-circle (or as close to full-circle as it can be brought):

What radical witness do I *now* bear?

This question may seem redundant at first, but on reflection, if you've made any effort to come to terms with the preceding questions, you'll find this one essential. For whatever else results from bearing radical witness and cultivating comparable ones, one thing is virtually guaranteed: *the witness you now bear will no longer be quite the same as it was*. Like other living things, witnesses preserve whatever identity they can be said to have only by adapting to ever-changing circumstances. Judgments have to be made from time to time about whether a developing witness preserves enough continuity to justify regarding it as basically the same. And you can be sure, as you keep track of your own witness's development, that eventually you will have to make such a judgment about it yourself. You will have to ask yourself just when a continually developing witness becomes so different that it can no longer be considered the same one--and whether your own witness has become that different. Don't expect to find any settled answers.

Occasionally people arrive at the judgment that what they once took to be impossible has actually occurred: what once claimed their radical loyalty and trust now seems to have been supplanted by something else. I referred to this earlier as an "impossible possibility" (a term borrowed from Karl Barth, who incidentally might object to the way I using it here) (Barth: 7). I am now acknowledging that impossible possibilities do seem to happen sometimes. (This is not as nonsensical as it may sound. If the history of Western thought teaches us anything, it is that what one generation considers an impossibility may become commonplace for another.) But even though they do seem to happen, this is no reason to become defensive. For it seems that you never know when an impossible possibility is going to happen until it is too late to do

anything to prevent it. People may say, in retrospect, that what they took to be a radical witness seems to have been supplanted by something else. But regardless of whether this change takes place all at once or over a long period of time, people never seem to realize that it's happening until it's already an accomplished fact. Perhaps this is just cause for a healthy dose of humility (maybe even "fear and trembling" in the sense Paul seems to have meant it), but defensiveness is simply beside the point.

Conclusion: No Guarantees

To summarize, here are the questions that together would bring your working theological method into sharper focus:

What radical witness do I bear?

Is this witness radically inescapable?

Is this witness radically nondefensive?

What comparable witnesses most require my cultivating?

(Comparable witnesses can be sorted provisionally into canonical, deuterocanonical, neglected, oppressive, or tiresome witnesses.)

How shall I cultivate these witnesses?

(That all depends on how you keep sorting and re-sorting them.)

What radical witness do I now bear?

(It will inevitably change in some way or other.)

They are of course utterly worthless unless you make asking them a lifelong pursuit. That is why it is also appropriate to think of them as spiritual exercises.

You would not have to be a Christian to benefit from asking them, but I do find them conducive to the kind of practical engagement Christian faith demands. They are also intended to be conducive to the kind of critical reflection that refuses simply to rationalize what one already believes (cf. Ogden: 142-143). But they are no recipe, and reciting them will not guarantee intellectual or religious responsibility. Still, since nothing else can guarantee that kind of responsibility, they are worth putting into practice. And I am confident that, however disorienting that practice turns out to be, it will at the very least make your life of faith a little more interesting than it would have been otherwise.

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