

**“WE WILL NOT LET YOU GO,  
UNLESS YOU BLESS US”:  
THE GOSPEL’S PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR  
ECCENTRIC RELATIONALITY**

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In his most systematic theological work thus far, Clark M. Williamson has added his voice to a growing number of “straightwhitemale” theologians who stand in solidarity with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and other people whom the church has marginalized throughout most of its history.<sup>1</sup> It is thus no accident that, under his deanship, Christian Theological Seminary has finally officially come out as a seminary that welcomes such people into its community.<sup>2</sup> As the resident “gaywhitemale” theologian on the faculty, I am profoundly grateful for his efforts on behalf of people like me, and for his encouragement of my own work along those lines.

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<sup>1</sup>Clark M. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999). See especially pp. 172-178.

<sup>2</sup>On 4 May 2001, the Board of Trustees adopted the following statement: “Christian Theological Seminary does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, color, gender, sexual orientation, age, national origin, handicap, disability or Vietnam era veteran status in employment, admissions or financial aid.”

But I owe him an even deeper debt of gratitude for his thoroughgoing insistence that all theological work should be judged by one fundamental criterion, namely, “the gospel of the promise of God’s love freely and decisively offered to each and all in Jesus Christ and the command of God that justice be done to each and all.”<sup>3</sup> No one is more concerned than Williamson to demand that any theological expression be morally and intellectually credible, “but this simply highlights part of what is involved in saying that it must be appropriate to the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Thus he does not sharply contrast critical reflection with a more confessional “faith seeking understanding” but instead regards the former as a crucial component of the latter.

Williamson is much clearer about this than he used to be, or so it seems to me. I suspect that one of our most valued colleagues, Joe R. Jones, has nudged him in this more confessional direction.<sup>5</sup> But I believe that Williamson’s pioneering work in Jewish-Christian dialogue has been just as influential. From the talmudic tradition he has come to regard Abraham, Jacob, Job, and others like them as models of faith, epitomizing “both trust in God and *chutzpah*, the audacity to question even God.”<sup>6</sup> Biblical faith, in other words, already *is* critical reflection.

Biblical faith is not only trust but a double *insistence* that God *must* be *my* God, as well as everybody’s, and that God *must* be *everybody’s* God, as well as mine. The faithful interpreter of scripture and tradition will thus approach these sources insisting, with Jacob, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me,” and with Abraham, “Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?”<sup>7</sup> That does not preclude trust but is itself motivated and authorized by a deep conviction that the gospel *must* in fact be true, despite any

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<sup>3</sup>Williamson, 86.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>See Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup>Williamson, 26. See also Darrell J. Fasching, *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 50-54.

<sup>7</sup>Gn 32:26; 18:24.

contrary appearances. The ultimate truth about reality *must* be glad tidings. Otherwise, why even care about truth for truth’s sake?

If the gospel and the faith it elicits are in fact as Williamson portrays them, then many of us who have found ourselves marginalized by our own heritage can understand better why it is that we nevertheless insist on playing a vital role in the continuation of that very heritage. Even in our moments of sharpest critique, we need not see ourselves as breaking faith with a heritage that, however fumblingly, presented us with the gospel. We need not consider ourselves any less orthodox than any others who claim that heritage for themselves. Nor should we see ourselves as attempting to weaken the gospel’s demands for costly discipleship. Our task is instead to call everyone, ourselves included, to a deeper engagement with the gospel’s claims.

This of course will be a controversy-laden task. The gospel is not simply a timeless truth that can be detached from the stories of Israel, of Jesus Christ, and of the earliest Christian communities, as most confessionally inclined theologians recognize. But as various Christian liberation movements are quick to point out, neither can the gospel be detached from its current embodiments in particular communities. So we are likely to differ not only over the implications we would draw from the gospel, but over the gospel’s very content.

That does not mean that we cannot recognize a common gospel in and through our differences – I am wagering that we can – but the differences will in many cases matter just as much as the commonalities. We are again, I think, dealing with faith’s double insistence: each of us says, in effect, the gospel must be *my* gospel, as well as everybody’s, and it must be *everybody’s* gospel, as well as mine. Part of theology’s task is to spell out how it can be both at once.

Thus, I recognize in Williamson’s work a rendition of the gospel, and of faith, that we share in common. But my own circumstances lead me to formulate the gospel differently. This is the gospel as one “gaywhitemalechristiantheologian” would state it:

In eccentricity and brokenness,  
the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ  
embraces each and every one of us just as we are  
and draws us to embody that communion for all others,  
now and always.

Because I am gay, I know what it is to be "eccentric" – peculiar, queer, marginal (literally, "out from the center": ex-centric). But is that not true of everyone? As creatures, are we not all eccentric, out from the center, peculiar and thus unique? And is that not a good thing? Because I am honest, I know that I am also broken, and I do not need anti-gay Christians to tell me that. I know that the evil I see in others also infects me, and I confess to God daily, "I have not loved you with my whole heart. I have not loved my neighbor as myself." This too seems true of everyone, in its own eccentric way.

Because I am Christian, I find my and others' eccentricity and brokenness tellingly described and critiqued in the biblical narratives. But these are also "narratives of a vulnerable God,"<sup>8</sup> a God whose radically self-giving life with us is itself an eccentric and redemptively broken communion, focused and lived out with an irreplaceable intensity in the life, death, and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>9</sup> Our creaturely eccentricity and brokenness are thus embraced, transfigured, and drawn into an even deeper, unending eccentricity that we know as the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, broken for

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<sup>8</sup>While we do not always agree, William C. Placher's work by that title still strikes me as one of the most persuasive portrayals of the biblical narratives. See William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup>I do not see any need to use Jesus' irreplaceability as a trump card to play in interfaith dialogue, especially a dialogue involving Judaism. God's eccentric and broken communion is certainly focused and lived out with an irreplaceable intensity in God's enduring covenant with Israel. Ironically, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity reflects, at least indirectly, the recognition that neither of these covenantal relations can be superseded, nor can one be subordinate to the other. This sets in place a non-competitive precedent for dialogue with other religious traditions as well.

us. And we find ourselves summoned to embody that communion for all others, including the “others” we find our very selves to be.

Much in this rendition of the gospel pivots around the word “communion,” which I understand as mutual indwelling, interpermeation (more technically, *perichoresis* or circumincession) – concepts that first gained prominence in early debates about the Trinity. To describe communion in such trinitarian-sounding language is to introduce a further note of eccentricity. For we are then speaking of a God whose very self is not a private, self-contained commodity but an open dynamism of self-giving to us in creation and redemption: at once, and interpermeably, the Giver, the Gift, and the Giving.<sup>10</sup> A God whose very self does not exist behind but in and through the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is a God whose self is centered eccentrically. And God draws creatures to reflect, in their own eccentric ways, the eccentric relationality that God already is, each of us in our own way eccentric centers of our shared worlds. Whatever else creation in “the image of God” may mean, it surely means this eccentric relationality.<sup>11</sup> The practical upshot of this is that

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<sup>10</sup>For a fruitful development of the terminology of self-giving, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I did not borrow this terminology directly from Webb. It was first suggested to me in a doxology by Brian Wren, set to the hymn tune *Lasst uns erfreuen*: “Praise God the Giver and the Gift. / Hearts, minds and voices now uplift: / Alleluia, alleluia. / Praise, praise the Breath of glad surprise, / freeing, uplifting, opening eyes: / Three-in-oneness, Love communing, / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” See Wren, *Bring Many Names* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1989), no. 35a. It is only fitting that a poet gets the principal credit here.

<sup>11</sup>While I did not have Jürgen Moltmann explicitly in mind when I first began to use the terminology of eccentricity to speak of both creation and God, I may have been more influenced than I realized by one of his essays I had read several years before. For example, “The unselfishness in the eternal love and unity of the trinitarian God is *perichoresis*: community in mutual interdependence and mutual interpenetration . . . By virtue of God’s unselfish love, God permeates all creatures and makes them alive. In this way God lives in the creation community and allows the community of all God’s creatures to live in God . . . *Perichoresis* is also the mystery of the

both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others (indeed, a self *is* such a communion).

This rendition of the gospel is especially liberating for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and other peculiar Christians, precisely because it reflects what we might as well call a preferential option for eccentric relationality.<sup>12</sup> The gospel not only permits but also encourages ever-new, peculiar, eccentric, and even queer embodiments for the sake of an ever-deeper communion. Because it is in the service of a deeper communion, this is no blanket endorsement of every kind of eccentricity. But it does place the burden of proof upon those who would draw arbitrary-looking, immovable boundaries around established embodiments of relationality.<sup>13</sup> Many of us see ourselves as having found God's eccentric communion at work outside those boundaries, and instead of going away, keeping quiet, or

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creation . . . Life means to exist with the other, for the other, and in the other . . . If all existing things exist reciprocally in each other and in God, then this world [and God, apparently] has no center in itself. It is 'excentric'" (Jürgen Moltmann, "God is Unselfish Love," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives [Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990], 119-121 passim). Moltmann is responding appreciatively to Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe's understanding of *Sunyata* ("emptiness"), and Moltmann's and other theologians' responses in that volume suggest that eccentric relationality may be a prominent theme in other traditions, even non-theistic ones: "With this creation mystery – and this mystery of God – *Sunyata* appears to come so close to creation that Christians can learn from Buddhists how to handle and how to live in this creation community" (ibid., 121).

<sup>12</sup>There are of course other preferential options for the dispossessed, for racial and ethnic minorities, for women, for the differently abled, and for other marginalized voices. It is useless to ask in general if any of these options is "more preferential" than others. Any of them can become especially urgent in certain contexts. The notion of "eccentric relationality" applies of course to any marginalized Christian movement, but not in a way that would co-opt that movement's distinctive voice.

<sup>13</sup>One of the clearest arguments I have found about shifting the burden of proof in this way is Mark McClain-Taylor's "But Isn't 'It' a Sin?," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 74-85.

waiting for everybody else to decide what to make of us, we are finding the same mixture of trust and *chutzpah* that allows us to stand with the likes of Jacob, holding on to the church, its traditions, and its scripture and crying, “We will not let you go, unless you bless us.”<sup>14</sup>

A gospel that pivots (eccentrically) around eccentric relationality will obviously make theology into a much messier enterprise, and sometimes a more painful one, than many of us might prefer. Reasoned appeals to scripture, tradition, and current testimonies will figure prominently, as always. But no matter how careful we are, our appeals will always be more persuasive to some than others.

For example, my understanding of the gospel makes it easy for me to regard Paul’s tangential remarks about same-sex activity as no more binding today than his remarks about hair styles, which he also thought to be dictated by “nature itself” (1 Cor 11:14-15). It inclines me to see Paul at his best in, for example, Gal 3:23-29, which to me seems to undercut any reservations he may have expressed elsewhere about the gender make-up of any couple devoted to embodying God’s communion. But others will not be convinced or even impressed by this line of thought.<sup>15</sup> That might be because they

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<sup>14</sup>I find strong affinities here with the following authors: Eugene Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); and Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995). I also frequently find in the work of Carter Heyward a provocative collection of insights that, it seems, always turn out to be more “orthodox” than they might appear at first glance. See her *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup>The most careful opponents include the following: Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); James P. Hanigan, *Homosexuality: The Test Case for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1988); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary*

understand the gospel less eccentrically, or because they do not make the gospel a sufficiently fundamental norm in their theologies. (For many, gender complementarity, not eccentric relationality, practically exhausts the image of God, though this actually seems to be a fairly novel interpretation of Genesis.)<sup>16</sup> Or it might be because they understand faithfulness to scripture and tradition in more static terms than the mixture of trust and *chutzpah* I believe the gospel encourages. It might even be because underneath they are still more homophobic than they realize (if I can still catch myself being homophobic, why not them?). Those are genuine suspicions. But many of those who differ seem too intelligent, too self-reflective, and in their own peculiar ways too compassionate, to dismiss so quickly. If I could account for our differences that easily, I would not find them so vexing.<sup>17</sup>

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*Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); and Marion L. Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup>“Dietrich Bonhoeffer appears to have been the first to interpret the *imago dei* in terms of an *analogia relationis* in which the male-female duality is the defining human relationship (*Schoepfung und Fall* [Munich: Kaiser, 1933] 29-30). It is Barth’s development of the idea, however, as a keystone of his anthropology (CD 3/1. 194-195), that has made it – and its faulty exegesis – such a widely influential notion” (Phyllis A. Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74 [1981]: 132 n. 8). For a critique of Barth’s anthropology in Barth’s own terms, see Rogers, 180-191. Ironically, Richard Hays, who makes gender complementarity a crucial backdrop in his argument against more eccentric relationships (Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 390), seems to have undermined that very point in his commentary on Galatians 3:28, concluding that “this created distinction [in Genesis 1:27] is no longer in force” (Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 11, ed. Leander E. Keck [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000], 273).

<sup>17</sup>Rogers provides an ingenious typology that reveals how “liberals” and “conservatives” hear each other’s arguments. “Fairly or unfairly, liberals type the conservative arguments in five ways: as narratives misread, literalism misplaced, natural law immune from natural science, vocation mis-



So we will continue to differ over what to make of the gospel, and we will not always know exactly why. No rendition of the gospel will prevent that. And those differences may cause considerable pain, on more than one front. A gospel of eccentric relationality that remains honest about brokenness should not lead us to expect any rosier forecast. But that gospel also draws us to acknowledge that we remain part of one another, even in the pain our differences may cause, and it provides hope that even the deepest pain cannot keep the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ from working in and through our differences.

In more practical terms, that means we must continue to seek opportunities for engaged conversation, even when we find it necessary for our own sanity and safety to embody the gospel apart from one another.<sup>18</sup> We especially need conversation when differences resist any simple explanation. Conversation is no panacea, but it remains imperative.

But engaged conversation will involve participants who are already making their own practical sense of the gospel, even if that should prove vexing to others. We gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and other marginalized Christians are beginning to find our

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applied to groups, and tradition at odds with justice” (Rogers, 23). “Fairly or unfairly, conservatives can type liberal arguments in five ways, too: as narratives misread, difficult passages ignored, natural science substituted for theology, heretical regard for souls over bodies, and experience substituted for tradition” (ibid., 25). Like Rogers, I am less interested in replaying these debates than in treating them as “difficulties leading to a more adequate account” of the gospel that makes “better sense of central claims about God, the community of the faithful, and their relationship” (ibid., 11). Where we may differ is that Rogers wants his account to depend heavily on a fairly developed understanding of the Trinity. I think it wiser, however, to offer an account that depends even more on a rendition of the gospel that authorizes *both* trinitarian models *and* ongoing questions about those models’ adequacy.

<sup>18</sup>As always, I am indebted to the work of David Tracy on conversation without illusions. See especially his *Plurality and Ambiguity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). See also my “Faith, Reason and Public Life: Are They Compatible?,” *Encounter* 55, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 237-251.

own ways of embodying the gospel, and while we can keep listening, we are not going to wait until the rest of the Body of Christ figures out what to make of us before moving ahead by the light *we* are able to see. Indeed, I suspect that we will begin to make more sense to the rest of the church, and be seen as more of a blessing, precisely as our own embodiments of communion bear witness to a gospel that proves to be even more stubbornly resilient than we are.<sup>19</sup>

We are not waiting, but we are not going away either. To the rest of the church, and the world, we are still saying, “We will not let you go, unless you bless us.” But we are not saying this simply for our own gain. We are saying it for the sake of the gospel itself. The eccentric relationality to which God draws all of us is the ultimate blessing, and we are wagering that, in embracing and blessing our *especially* eccentric relationality, both the church and the world will find themselves drawn with us toward that ultimate blessing in ways they, and we, have scarcely imagined.

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<sup>19</sup>This is similar to the sympathetic challenge Luke Timothy Johnson issues: “Such is the witness the church now needs from homosexual Christians. Are homosexuality and holiness of life compatible? Is homosexual covenantal love according to ‘the mind of Christ’ an authentic realization of that Christian identity authored by the Holy Spirit, and therefore ‘authored’ as well by the Scripture despite the ‘authorities’ speaking against it? The church can discern this only on the basis of faithful witness. The burden of proof required to overturn scriptural precedents is heavy, but it is a burden that has been borne before. The church should not, cannot, define itself in response to political pressure or popularity polls. But it is called to discern the work of God in human lives and adapt its self-understanding in response to that work of God. Inclusivity must follow from evidence of holiness; are there narratives of homosexual *holiness* to which we must begin to listen?” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], 148.) Of course those of us already striving to live “narratives of homosexual holiness” may differ over just how heavy the burden of proof should be. Burdens of proof vary both historically and contextually.