

Tribute to Dr. Christopher L. Morse

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A recent article in *The Christian Century* featured “stunt pastors” who “use unorthodox means to draw attention to [their] message.” Such pastors

... have challenged congregants to have sex (with their spouse) for 30 days straight or have dressed like homeless people or lived in a tiny box or on a roof to gin up attention, attendance or funds....

The writer explains:

The rise of the entertainment industry, combined with a focus on marketing techniques to preach the faith or build up a church, has sparked a penchant for ministry gimmicks that go well beyond the old dunk tank.¹

Reading this article, I was reminded of novelist Marilynne Robinson’s lament over

...the rise in this country of a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought. I intend this as a criticism [she said], not only of the so-called fundamentalists but, more particularly, of the mainline churches, which have fairly assiduously culled out all traces of the depth and learnedness that were for so long among their greatest contributions to American life.²

While there are many stones on which to step between “stunt pastors” and “a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought,” pressure against thoughtfulness has deep roots in American culture, particularly American religion. In 1962, the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that as American society expanded westward, religion became both voluntary and pragmatic. As a result,

...the work of the minister tended to be judged by his success in a single area—the saving of souls in measureable numbers. The local

1 David Gibson, “Pastor stunts make a point and garner headlines,” in *The Christian Century* 2/19/2014, page 15. The essay is also available online: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-01/top-12-pastor-stunts-living-atheist-just-latest-ministry-gimmick>

2 Marilynne Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals,” in *The American Scholar* (Spring 2006), 42–43.

minister was judged either by his charismatic powers or by his ability to prepare the congregation for the preaching of some itinerant ministerial charmer who would really awaken its members. The “star” system prevailed in religion before it reached the theatre...The Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular crusader and exhorter...In considerable measure the churches withdrew from intellectual encounters with the secular world [and] gave up the idea that religion is part of the whole life of intellectual experience...By 1853 an outstanding clergyman complained that there was “an impression, somewhat general, that an intellectual clergyman is deficient in piety, and that an eminently pious minister is deficient in intellect.”³

To his credit and to the benefit of the Christian church, Christopher Morse taught in such a way that his students who became pastors were inspired and trained to offer an alternative to this deeply-rooted historical pressure.

I.

I grew up in a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, in which life revolved around school, sports, and the small Presbyterian Church my family and I attended. The church provided a warm, nurturing, “family-like” atmosphere in which people knew one another, attended church camp and youth fellowship together, and genuinely cared for one another in times of need.

During that period—the 1960s—while my parents were kind, gentle, and fair minded, many of their friends were fearful of, resistant to, and angry about the Civil Rights Movement. Some were overt racists. I remembered the vestiges of segregation, such as signs on public restrooms delineating “Colored” and “White”; restaurant owners refusing to serve African-Americans; and notices posted in establishments announcing the owners’ right to refuse service to anyone the owners chose not to serve. As a child and young adolescent, I had an unformed, internal sense that “this was not right” and “there had to be a better way.”

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in my hometown I was thirteen years old. The minister of our church, which was all white, was a gentle, non-confrontational man about my parents’ age. The Sunday after Dr. King was assassinated he stood in the pulpit and said:

I had planned to join my fellow clergy for a march in support of striking sanitation workers. But what was to be a protest march turned into

³ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1962), 86–87. The quote comes from Bela Bates Edwards, “Influence of Eminent Piety on the Intellectual Powers,” in *Writings* (Boston, 1853), Vol. II, 497–498.

a memorial march. I am so overcome with grief by what happened in our city this week that I cannot preach.

He then sat down. At that moment, the nascent yearning I had for “a better way” began to recognize its source in the Presbyterian Church in which I had worshipped all my brief life.

That event led me to a deep involvement with the church, primarily through my local presbytery and the denomination of which we were part—the Presbyterian Church in the United States. I became active on a mission committee and youth council of the presbytery. I attended summer conferences at the denominational conference center in Montreat, North Carolina. I was exposed to African-American Presbyterian youth as well as to nationally known African American preachers, such as Reverend Joseph Roberts, who later succeeded Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., as Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

While that which initially energized me were the more open and accepting attitudes on race I encountered in the church, I was soon exposed to another aspect of my Presbyterian heritage—“the life of the mind.” In addition to perceiving myself as “different” on the race issue, I also perceived myself as “different” from most of my youthful peers in that the faith they espoused placed a strong emphasis on religious conversion, literal interpretation of scripture, and personal piety. The same conferences that exposed me to racial acceptance exposed me as well to preachers and teachers who affirmed the historical-critical method, who read scripture in conjunction with literature and current events, and who spoke as much to my developing mind as to my heart. While it was courageous stands on race and civil rights that caught my attention and invited me deeper into my religious tradition, it was the appreciation of that tradition for learning—both religious and secular—that kept me engaged as well.

I attended college at a nearby state university. I majored in history. I wrote a thesis on a local episode of the Fundamentalist Modernist controversy. I immersed myself in American intellectual history and took courses in philosophy, Shakespeare, Chaucer, the classics, Greek, Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible, and American literature. All the while I was active in a local Presbyterian Church whose pastor exposed me to Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer.

The pull of ministry became great. In the summer prior to my senior year I decided to answer what I believed was a call to the ministry. While I was aware that mainline churches were both in turmoil and shrinking, and that theology and biblical studies seemed to be both declining from their former heights within the cultural conversation and in internal disarray, I also believed that there could be life in the tradition that had produced the theologians I was reading. Even as a college senior, I felt I would likely serve as a pastor in the south. In order to bring perspective to such service, and to find the richest theological life I could, I decided to “head east” for seminary. I looked at Harvard, Yale, and Union in New

York. I was accepted at the two to which I applied and chose Union out of an intuitive sense that I wanted to be in the city.

In the first semester, I enrolled in Systematic Theology 101, and there met Christopher Morse.

II.

Christopher was appealing to me as a teacher for many reasons. Like me, he was from the south. He was, of course, male. He had been a parish minister. In addition, he took an interest in his students, regaling us in informal settings of stories from the pastorate, particularly funny occurrences at weddings and funerals, something many of us would soon face.

Christopher was also a careful and thoughtful lecturer. The course followed the outline of the Apostles' Creed, illuminating each clause as to the theological history and formulations to which it spoke. What most impacted me was the presentation Christopher made on the clause "in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord."

Christopher Morse presented a schema that I have used throughout my thirty-four years of parish ministry.⁴ In it, he asked: "To what do we refer when we say the words 'Jesus Christ'?" Starting left from right, Christopher then put on the board the following "segments" of what he called "the life and destiny of Jesus Christ," all of which are involved in the name itself:

- Pre-existence
- Incarnation/Birth
- Earthly Ministry
 - Deeds
 - Miracles
 - Acts of love and justice
 - Words
 - Parables
 - Sermon on the Mount
- Passion
 - Struggle in Gethsemane
 - Betrayal
 - Arrest

⁴ Only recently in a conversation with Christopher did I learn that his schema originated with Reginald Fuller, something Christopher perhaps told us during its presentation, but something that eluded the handwritten notes I took during the lecture and used for over two decades.

- Abandonment
- Trial
- Mocking
- Death
- Resurrection
 - Empty Tomb
 - Appearances
- Ascension
- Gift of the Spirit
- Promised Return

Christopher aligned each of these with scriptural references. He stressed that the name "Jesus Christ" refers to these as a whole and that when we say, "I believe in Jesus Christ," we are saying that we believe in the totality of who Christ was, is, and shall be in his life and destiny.

Over the years, that schema helped me become clearer about my own understanding of Christian faith, specifically of the identity and purpose of Jesus Christ. I used variations of it in teaching adults, confirmands, new members, and church officers. What I came to emphasize were two related ideas:

- Each of us has an initial attraction to Jesus Christ based on one or two of these entry points, and
- Our challenge is to expand from our entry point to encompass within our faith as many of the aspects of "Jesus Christ" as we can hold in our hearts and minds and embody in our lives.

Thus, I taught if a person is initially attracted to Jesus Christ because of a strong spiritual or sacramental experience, the challenge is to relate the reality of that experience to Jesus' earthly life. If a person is initially attracted to Jesus Christ because of his teaching or deeds, the challenge is to relate what Jesus did in time to his origins with God before time. This schema served as a useful way of helping individuals who were members of the church or considering membership—some even considering baptism and profession of faith—move from one aspect of Christ's life—for example, his obvious and deep concern for the poor and oppressed—to other aspects of his life—such as his eschatological promises. This schema helped members of churches I have served to relate to one another across theological divisions they sometimes had, especially once they connected the priorities within their own faith to the aspects of "Jesus Christ" behind their priorities and were able to see similar connections within others. This schema was particularly helpful in encouraging—through preaching and teaching—members of my churches to be less dismissive of—and even become more open to—the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament—most notably the Book of Revelation—so often ignored by mainline Protestants and left to more evangelical and

fundamentalist churches. All these benefits flowed directly from the teaching of Christopher Morse.

III.

A second course I took from Christopher that has had a continuing influence on me was a seminar he offered on the early writings of Karl Barth. What most helped me in this course was to connect the passion, existentialism, and sheer liveliness of Barth's writing—especially in the correspondence with Eduard Thurneysen and in *The Commentary on Romans*—to similar intensity and passion I had experienced in reading Kierkegaard the summer before my first semester in seminary.

Reading Barth is never a completed task. For those who are able to stick with it, his ideas and images often have immediate impact (like poetry) and long term effect (like philosophy). Handwritten notes I made on the pages of the *The Commentary to Romans*⁵ we used in the course reveal that I read a passage whose impact on me at the time was not major. Yet in the past few decades, the passage has become significant in my own faith and therefore in my preaching and teaching. The passage to which I refer is Barth's introduction to his exegesis of Romans 12:9–15. The introduction is titled "Positive Possibilities." It reads:

The phrase 'Positive Ethics' means that volition and action which constitute a negation of the *form of this world* (xii. 2), a behaviour which contradicts its erotic course, and protest against its great error. Properly speaking, 'Positive Ethics' belong only to the volition and action of God. Absolute, positive, ethical, human volition and action which genuinely protest against it, lie beyond our knowledge. We do, however, know a relative positive human behaviour which, although it belongs to the human possibilities of this world, and although it is marked—as, indeed, all human possibilities are marked—by the *form of this world*, nevertheless possesses, even in its *present* form, by virtue of the imperishable and primary constitution of the universe, a parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS. We must, however, be careful how we express this. We may find it easier to regard some kinds of human behaviour as being more pregnant with parabolic significance than others. We may, for example, choose love rather than hatred. Certain particular human possibilities may appear to be more closely related to the divine disturbance and transformation than others are. It may seem to us more probable that we should attain to that 'sacrifice', that demonstration to the honour of god within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: more probable, that is to say, that we should be

5 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933)

able to fulfill the four commandments written on the first 'Table', if we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second 'Table'. But when we say 'easier', 'more closely', 'more probable', we mean that the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their 'matter'—for materially they belong to *this world*—but in their 'form', that is to say, in their Primal Origin, the Oneness of the subject of the action. The possibility that from time to time God may be honoured in concrete human behaviour which contradicts the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left open.⁶

When Barth writes that positive ethics "belong only to the volition and action of God," his affirmation is consistent with my Calvinist sense that any understanding we have of good and evil, right and wrong, indeed of God, is limited. I resonate with Barth's statement that "absolute, positive, ethical, human volition and action... lie beyond our knowledge." As a pastor, I stand with members of my church who struggle with the same joys and sorrows, successes and failures in personal and family life with which I struggle and who face enormously complex working lives in the worlds of business, law, social work, teaching, military service, diplomacy, and national politics. In my opinion, the instances in which any of us is able to find "absolute, positive, ethical human volition and action" are limited at best.

Barth goes on to say:

We do, however, know a relative positive human behaviour which, although it belongs to the human possibilities of this world, and although it is marked—as, indeed, all human possibilities are marked—by the *form of this world*, nevertheless possesses, even in its *present* form, by virtue of the imperishable and primary constitution of the universe, a parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS.

Barth acknowledges that despite the limits of "absolute, positive, ethical, human...action," we are able to take positive action that is "relative" and "parabolic." He then immediately says, as I believe he should: "We must, however, be careful how we express this." Barth then becomes even more daring:

We may find it easier to regard some kinds of human behaviour as being more pregnant with parabolic significance than others. It may seem to us more probable that we should...honour...god within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: more probable, that is to say, that we should be able to fulfill the four commandments

6 Barth, *Romans*. Italics are Barth's.

written on the first ‘Table’, if we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second ‘Table’.

Barth is saying that it is more likely that we will assume that we are closer to following the will of God when following the final six of the Ten Commandments—dealing with our life in the world—as the way we honor God and thus meet the demands of the first four commandments. But, Barth says, at the conclusion of his statement:

The possibility that from time to time God may be honoured in concrete human behaviour which contradicts the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left open.⁷

This final sentence, and the paragraph that leads to it, have been eye-opening to me on several fronts as an individual Christian and as a parish minister. Certainly, people in the parish, myself included, find relief in the idea that some of our “behaviours” might be more “parabolically” close to the will of God than others. As a pastor in a denomination in which understandings of sexual orientation, attitudes about marriage and divorce, and norms about sexual behavior and its relationship to marriage have been changing during my lifetime, the idea that one could be “honoring” God even if one violates or accepts violation of one of the commandments of the “Second Table” is thought-provoking. In addition, as a pastor who has served a congregation in which many people work in the arenas of military service, defense, national security, and diplomacy, this possibility is hopeful and challenging. It opens the door to ethical decision-making that may initially contradict moral and religious absolutes yet ultimately prove to be responsible. This is life-giving to many, given the complex moral choices they face in specific situations with restraints concerning time and options.

Barth links the validity of such “violations” to “their source in the *Primal Origin*”:

...the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their ‘matter’—for materially they belong to *this world*—but in their ‘form’, that is to say, in their Primal Origin, the Oneness of the subject of the action.

Even while Barth cautions, “We must, however, be careful how we express this,” the freedom he gives people to seek to honor God by making the most positive ethical decisions they are able to make from a limited set of options in a limited amount of time can lead them to rely on their faith, their prayers, their relationships with others in their Christian community, the theological preaching

and teaching within their heritage, and their consciences in ways that are deep and profound.

Like many teachers, Christopher Morse may never have known the power he was unleashing by exposing his students to this and other such passages. He may, in fact, have never discussed this passage in any class over the years. He may never even have noticed it himself, just as I did not notice it until twenty years or so after I first read it. But such is the power of the kind of teacher he was and is: thorough, patient, pastoral with his students, sowing seeds that bear fruit beyond his wildest imagination, serving as a counter to “a culture of Christianity that does not encourage thought.” For his being my teacher and friend, I am grateful to God.

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7 Ibid.