

The Difference Christopher Morse Makes: A Dogmatics for the Practice of Ministry

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“Furthermore, my deep appreciation is expressed to the local churches and pastors’ schools that have engaged with me on this topic...”
Christopher Morse, Preface to *The Difference Heaven Makes*

Friend and Colleague

My contribution to this festschrift will be a brief sketch of how the work of Christopher L. Morse is a great resource for the church and the practice of ministry. Particularly how his work in dogmatics has informed and influenced my own fifty-year ministry as a United Methodist pastor.

I have known Christopher Morse for a long time. We became friends at Yale Divinity School in 1961. As a Midwesterner from DePauw University, a small Methodist college in Indiana, I found the YDS community stimulating and daunting at the same time. In this land of intellectual giants I was happy to discover this older student who was not only one of these “giants”, but friendly, very funny...and a Methodist. His Virginia accent and southern warmth put me at ease. We became roommates in Beecher House during his final year and my second (1962-63). I consider our meeting in seminary as a providential act. Our friendship has deeply affected the shape of my thinking and the course of my career.

He graduated in 1963 and went off to an appointment at a small Methodist Church in southeastern Virginia. I married Katherine Ault in January 1965 and graduated in June. We went off to my first appointment at Rockville, Maryland. Christopher and I kept in touch as our careers progressed along different tracks—his in academia, mine in parish ministry.

After his five-year pastorate, he pursued graduate studies at Union and Columbia, first an MTS and then a PhD. He was hired by Union and began his long and distinguished career.

Over the next forty years I served six churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Christopher visited or preached at most of them. He preached at the baptism of our first child, Benjamin, at the Rockville Church in 1966. He baptized our daughter Sarah in 1968 at Trinity Church in Frederick, Maryland. To our children he was always Uncle Kit. He tells the story of his visit to Georgetown when Sarah was young. When we entered a shop, little Sarah boldly declared to a stranger, “This is my Baptizer!”

I was always grateful that Christopher, who spent his life in the academy, never forgot his roots in Virginia Methodism and his parish experience. The reason, I suppose, that in all his serious dogmatics the “so what” question was never far from his mind.

EARLY INFLUENCES: INTERPRETER OF BARTH

As the years passed, Christopher sent me copies of each new book, journal article and lecture. I devoured them all with interest and care, because they made sense and because they were helpful to a young pastor, especially in preaching.

Two journal pieces in particular helped me get a clearer picture of what Karl Barth was all about. The first was “The Future of Karl Barth’s Theology”, *Dialog*, Winter, 1981.

Among other things, he introduced the idea of “testing the spirits”. “Faith in God, biblically understood, includes a call not to believe every spirit—a call for disbelief in the idols....In this regard faith is the willing commencement of disbelief, not its suspension (p.10). “Testing the spirits” became a familiar theme and the title for his major work, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (1994, first edition; 2009, second edition).

He discusses Barth in relationship to Ernst Troeltsch, who precedes him and liberation theologies which follow. I was encouraged to read that “Barth came to affirm...that something does happen when the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and signified as parable in the social conflicts of this present age.” (p.12). Morse’s summary of these three theological threads reappears in works to come: “God is made known in the world where all that seeks to overcome the will and way of Jesus Christ in this present time has been, is being, and shall be overcome. The overcoming of suffering and oppression can only be known in relation to specific suffering and oppression, but it is the overcoming which is the liberation, and it is Jesus Christ, not as religious symbol, not as ethical model, not as cultural construct, but as the narrated confession of the gospel whose identity identifies what is being overcome” (p.13).

Morse’s sentences may be long and do not lend themselves to homiletic cadence, but the thought structure frequently provided the substance for this preacher’s sermons.

The second article was “Grace in Karl Barth’s World and Ours”, *Katallagete*, Spring 1983. It was this article that helped resolve a problem over the extent of salvation that had been disturbing me for some time. As a Methodist, I was infused with Wesleyan notions of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace; and Methodist Arminian talk of “growing in grace” which involves a cooperation between God and humans. Grace, in such a view, is conditional—God’s favor is granted if only the human believes. Hence the tension. I had come to believe that grace was an unconditional gift. Wesley’s prevenient grace becomes a universal *offer* of forgiveness from God that awaits and depends upon a human decision. Who then is saved: only those who make a decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior? Or only those whom God elects? Is there a third option?

Barth states quite simply in the *Church Dogmatics*, according to Morse, that God is identified in Jesus Christ as one who is for us without condition. God’s grace, Barth describes, as overtaking us and embracing us from the opposite direction, even “seizing us from behind”....We are not the seeker, God is. In and of ourselves we are disposed not to desire grace but to reject it. The Cross shows that when grace appears among us it is not what we expected, not what we think can meet our need....The message of the Resurrection is that God does not allow our opposition to grace to defeat it. All that overcame Jesus on the Cross has been, is being, and shall be overcome” (p.26).

Those words, or something close to them, found their way into the conclusion of more than one of my sermons.

Morse continues by discussing Barth on grace and election. God’s righteousness does not allow our self-destruction, Morse wrote. “Thus the distinction the Gospel message draws is not between one group of humans who are elect and another who are rejected. The distinction is between those who recognize that they are loved without condition and those who yet do not” (p.27). He goes on to quote Barth—words that became decisive for me on the question of the extent of salvation:

“Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again for all....To that extent, objectively, all are justified, sanctified, and called. But the hand of God has not touched all in such a way that they can see and hear, perceive and accept and receive all that God is for all and therefore for them. To those who have not been touched in this way by the hand of God the axiom that Jesus Christ is the Victor is as such unknown. It is a Christian and not a general axiom; valid generally, but not generally observed and acknowledged...but the hand of God has touched and seized Christians in this way—which means the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit...This is without any merit or co-operation on their part, just as the reconciliation of the whole world in Jesus Christ is without merit or co-operation.” (CD, Vol. IV, Part I, Para.58, 1956, p. 148).

Scales fell from my eyes. Barth’s understanding has become a core conviction of my own. Christ died for all, period!

In addition to these articles on Barth, Christopher pointed out the utility of the Index Volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Among other things it contains a biblical index citing all the references in the CD to Barth’s exegetical work. Barth has commented on virtually every text in the Old and New Testaments. The Index indicates which verses or pericopes have an extended comment and which receive a shorter treatment. In sermon preparation I almost always checked Barth’s discussion of the lections. More often than not he provided fresher and deeper insights than other commentaries.

Christopher became my guide through the Barth corpus, particularly the *Church Dogmatics*. The detailed course outline from his Barth seminar provided a navigational chart for the 12 volumes. Once when I was facing a difficult funeral sermon for a twenty year old woman of my parish who had committed suicide, I was grateful that Christopher had earlier pointed me to Barth’s chapter on “The Determination of the Rejected” (CD, II,2, Para. 35:4). Here Barth deals with the

question: How does it stand between Jesus and Judas? It became the theological basis for my sermon “How Does It Stand Between Jesus and Mary Twelve?”

Some months later the young woman’s mother wrote a letter of gratitude: “And though we miss her, the aura of her bright light lingers, and nowhere more beautifully than in the sure and certain way you have come to understand and proclaim redemption: as that moment whenever and wherever Christ finds one of us needy, abandoned and in our own personal hell—he comes to claim us! For Christ truly never gives up on us—not you or me or Twelvie...certainly not in those final and for some, the most terrifying moments at the end.” And at the end of her letter, “On Holy Saturday I was actually complaining to [my husband] after reading *Body and Soul* how redemption happens in novels and I wished it could/ would happen in my life! And once again, for my own resurrection, I needed your keen and kind word for me to be able to recognize and acknowledge what God had already done in my life! Thank you.”

INTERPRETER OF MOLTMANN

Earlier Christopher had in a similar way opened up to me the theology of Jurgen Moltmann. I was out of seminary before *The Theology of Hope* was published, but I bought it while at my first solo parish in Frederick, Maryland. I found it too much to digest in the midst of parish duties and wasn’t tempted to return until I had read Morse’s first book *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann’s Theology* in 1979.

By now I was pastor of Dumbarton Church in Georgetown where I preached an Advent sermon entitled “Adventus Dei”. I relied heavily on *The Logic of Promise*. Moltmann was now on my radar. Once again, Christopher was my interpreter. His essay “Jurgen Moltmann” in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, edited by Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, (1984) he locates Moltmann’s place among late 20th century theologians who lifted eschatology from the appendix of systematics to a central place as theology’s interpretive key. He lays out the essential arguments in *Theology of Hope*, *The Crucified God*, *The Trinity & the Kingdom of God*, *The Church and the Power of the Holy Spirit*. Morse lifts up a variety of themes and words in Moltmann’s eschatology that become central to Morse’s own views in later books: the Kingdom of God is *at hand* but not *in hand*, *eschatologia crucis*, God’s promise as presence, the crucified God, imminence, anticipation, promise, future.

Once again he helped me organize and connect a multitude of complex ideas from Moltmann into a coherent framework that was consistent with my understanding of Barth. I was well on my way toward organizing a theological system that made sense to me.

At the invitation of my friend and colleague Deryl Fleming, I developed a short term course on “The God of Hope” for the Ravensworth Baptist Church in Springfield, Virginia in 1986. I sought to lay out some of Moltmann’s basic views by looking at relevant biblical texts in four sessions:

1. Account for the Hope that Is Within You

2. Hope revealed in the God Who Comes
3. Hope Crucified and Raised
4. The Practice of Hope in the Community

I continued to use variations of this study in my own churches. I thought it a good way to introduce parishioners to my basic beliefs about God and the Christian life. As the years went by I gained confidence in these convictions that had been shaped mightily by my theological favorites: Barth, Moltmann and Morse.

VISITATIONS FROM PROFESSOR MORSE

Christopher was generous with his time and came to speak at my churches on several occasions. He came twice to Dumbarton Church in Georgetown in the late 70’s. At our annual June retreat he gave a two-part lecture on “Rachel’s Refusal”. Rachel “weeping for her children” in Matthew’s birth of Jesus narrative is a voice that needs to be heard along with angels and shepherds at the celebration as a reminder that grief and joy go together in the gospel accounts. There is a link between the Nativity and Good Friday. Rachel in her refusal of false comfort or easy explanation of suffering has an honored place in the Gospel. “In the darkness surrounding Rachel, just as much as in the light surrounding the natal star, the birthplace of Christ is revealed....In the godforsakenness of God’s own Son on the Cross...the promised hope for Rachel is embodied. By not believing any consolation short of God’s own descent into hell in Christ, the refusal becomes a faithful witness pointing to the Resurrection” (Not Every Spirit, 10-11).

As I remember, Rachel’s somber themes were not easy sell at that seaside event with children romping at the edges and sailboats beckoning the adult learners. But Morse’s thoughtfulness and warmth managed to hold their attention sufficiently. They returned for the second lecture. Early on Christopher was developing a theme that he wove throughout his writings and appeared in final version in *Not Every Spirit*, chapter one: “*The Call to Faithful Disbelief*”, as well as in other later chapters.

In the spring of 1983 Christopher lectured again at Dumbarton church on the Doctrine of the Trinity. This time in the church hall. It was an evening I’ve never forgotten. His explication of this ancient dogma was so clear and concise that I’ve referred to the manuscript many times for my own use and have shared it with students at Wesley Theological Seminary and candidates for ordination in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

After a succinct account of the development of the doctrine with some classical explanations, he turns to the contemporary meaning of the Trinity where he is often at his best. First, he lays out the Social Trinity in understandable terms—that God’s being is relational, Tri-unity, co-existence. God is being one with another in the spirit of love and freedom. Therefore, if we are made in God’s image, true selfhood for us does not mean an ego in isolation from another but

means we can become, with God's grace, one with another in a mutual spirit of love and freedom.

Second, he focuses on the Passion and the intimate relationship seen there between Jesus and the One to whom he calls in his suffering. Because of their intimate life together, whatever the Son experiences is experienced in the heart of God. Jesus' crucifixion is experienced in God's own being. God suffers in two senses. God in Jesus Christ not only knows what it is to give one's life in death, God also knows the pain of seeing a loved one die, his "only begotten". In other words, the worst forms of suffering and death that humans have to face are known in the very Being of God. However comforting that may be for us it would not be particularly good news were it not for the overcoming of death by God's resurrection power.

A SENSE OF HUMOR

At this point, I want to comment on Christopher's sense of humor. It was evident at the beginning of this lecture on the Trinity when he introduced his topic in a self-deprecating way, saying:

"About a year ago I was asked to speak on the same subject at Riverside Church in Manhattan for an adult group, and someone happened to have a tape recorder there. They sent a tape of my remarks to my mother in Virginia. The next time I was home we played it together. And she said, "Now, where were you?" and I said, "Well it was a group of lay adult people like yourself." And she said, "Now I honestly can't see how that talk could have helped anybody."

He went on to explain that a few months later he was asked to speak again on the Trinity at an Episcopal Church in Greenwich Village. At the beginning he told this story of about his mother's reaction upon hearing the tape recording. When he finished the lecture he felt he'd done a better job. He thought, "I've probably succeeded in telling why the Trinity might possibly matter." But when the moderator said, "Now, any questions?" A young man in the front row said, "Your mother was right."

Christopher preached the Installation sermon when I was appointed to the University United Methodist Church in College Park, Maryland in 1987. The title "Out There On a Prayer" was taken from an interview in *The Washington Post* I had sent him with John Updike. In this interview Updike, who had written several novels about ministers, confessed to a certain "residual anger" toward them. "I mean," he said, "ministers tend to be disappointing, by and large...You don't have to turn water into wine, but you do ask that they profess what they're being paid, after all, to profess....Ministers are interesting people in that they are sort of out there on a prayer, doing what they are being paid to do, they know not quite what. And nobody else does." "Like writers," he said, "but in some way perhaps more essential."

Morse continued his sermon saying, "The occasion was the publication of Updike's latest novel entitled *Roger's Version*. It is about a Methodist minister who

experiences "burn-out", loses his faith, and becomes a seminary professor. (I find it a bit disconcerting that several of my former students phoned me immediately recommending that I especially read this book. I am still not sure why Tom thought I should have this clipping.)"

THE DIFFERENCE MORSE MAKES FOR THE CHURCH

In these years since my retirement from parish ministry in 2006 I have been teaching The Practice of Ministry and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. I also mentor provisional elders and deacons for the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Baltimore-Washington Conference. I see myself as a bridge person between church and academy. From this perspective, I see the great need for theologians, like Christopher Morse, who work in the academy but take seriously the mission of the church.

This need has become clear at several points in my current work. A frequent complaint I hear from Boards of Ordained Ministry is that too many candidates struggle mightily to give a coherent and compelling account of their own faith. And when asked to name major theologians who have influenced their personal theology, often they cannot name one.

I'm also alarmed by reports from new pastors about the content of preaching workshops offered as continuing education. Often it's tips on how to improve your sermons. Use technology: power point your main points for easy following and project visuals to add punch to your messages. Or print a sermon quiz in the bulletin with fill-in-the-blank questions: "Jesus wants you to _____?" "The disciples were slow to realize that _____?"

One workshop focused on the value of preaching a sermon series on "What I learned from the toy box." Another advertised this theme: How to preach a summer series on "Jesus goes to the movies." An evangelism workshop instructor implored pastors, "We need to forget about exegesis and everything we've learned in seminary, because what people want to know is how to have a sizzling marriage, not how to make the Bible relevant to my life".

All the more reason I am convinced of the need for good theologians who are excellent teachers. I am personally grateful for the influence of Christopher Morse in my theological development and career. When I think of all the other lives he has touched in his long teaching career, I am awed by the ever-widening impact he has had on the life of the church. I remember his words towards the end of that installation sermon "Out There On a Prayer" on the importance of the preaching ministry:

"Why is the Church's ministry essential? Because it works? Because it succeeds? Because it knows what it's all about? No. The ministry is essential because it has been prayed for. And that means you and me. According to John's Gospel it is Jesus who says to the Father in heaven:

'I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their [the disciples] word...that the world may know that thou hast loved them even as thou hast loved me'
(John 17:20,23b)

Today we are among those historically who have come to believe in Christ through the word and witness of those original disciples passed on to us through a long tradition. That means, for us and for our ministry Jesus himself has prayed."

ENCOURAGER OF PASTORS

Morse's abiding interest in keeping the academy connected to the church is evidenced by his commitment to keep his writing relevant to the practice of ministry and to keep on visiting churches. Even in my retirement years (from parish ministry) Christopher has been willing to speak to the clergy groups I lead in the Washington area. Since the publication of *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*, he has come twice to talk about the book: first with my Pastor-Theologian group and more recently with my mentoring group of provisional elders in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Each time he has impressed these pastors, veterans and rookies alike, with his utter respect for the preaching role and his great passion for the preaching task. "Something essential" about it, as Updike would say.

I expressed my thoughts about this encourager of pastors in my letter to him after his last visit:

Dear Christopher,

Thank you so much for coming to my mentoring group. I was pleased in every way. My concern about the ability of some to grasp the material and come up with good questions was unfounded. Starting with YuJung and going around the table they all came up with thoughtful questions. I was grateful for the respectful way you dealt with each question and questioner. You gave each one an opportunity to dialogue with you. I could tell by the feeling in the room they were engaged with careful listening, note-taking, laughing, speaking.

You're in your element in these situations which I've had the privilege of witnessing several times now. A born teacher. But it's not just teaching. It's your investment in the work of teaching the gospel, expressed at times with great intensity and emotion as you recall holy moments with parishioners or students. What is especially moving to a group of new pastors is the way you convey the cruciality of their work. Everyone, including me, walked out of the church feeling gratitude for this difficult, sometimes under-appreciated vocation of ours. I could see it in their faces, esp. Braulio and YuJung. After all, they both wanted to take a selfie with you!

All the best, Tom

TEACHER OF TEACHERS

Finally, I see Christopher's impact on my current part-time teaching work. At Wesley Seminary I co-lead a colloquy for Student Pastors. They are part-time students serving as pastors of small, rural churches. They often feel swamped by the combination of parish duties and classroom assignments. They are learning ministry by the seat of their pants and are often overwhelmed by the emotional demands of their churches and by the intellectual demands of school. Our colloquy serves as a life-line. My co-leader, Kendall Soulen, is a member of the academic faculty, and together we remind them that they are not alone. We encourage them to help each other as colleagues and point them to resources for coping with each crisis they face.

One of our most important roles is to help them connect the dots between theory and practice. We try to help them develop biblical/theological lenses for viewing the world and all they face, both in the parish and the seminary. I am indebted to Christopher Morse for his role in my own theological formation which, in turn, has equipped me for this work with the next generation of church leaders. For this and for his abiding influence upon my long ministry of Word and Sacrament I am especially grateful.

Based on my experience with Christopher, it is staggering to consider the import of his entire career. Consider the many students he taught in his long career—probably numbering in the thousands—who themselves have become teachers, pastors, and church leaders. Then consider all the people they have influenced—exponentially, somewhere in the thousands. The impact he has had on the church in North America and beyond is indeed broad and deep. Christopher Morse has made a world of difference for the church and for me.