

Pastoral Epistle  
Kara Slade  
Trinity Church, Princeton NJ

Over the course of my career, I have repeatedly experienced a particular genre of meeting in which some extremely accomplished leaders asked each other what they valued most about the church. Probably the most common response, across different events and constituencies, is “community.” I find it both enlightening and confusing that groups of extremely smart and successful church people consistently struggle to connect their love of the community with the reality of God, or with the difference Jesus Christ makes for the church. They struggle with the particularity of Christian speech, and perhaps by extension with the particularity of Christianity. The end result is a denomination that loudly proclaims its welcome, but without a clear and consistent idea of what, specifically, anyone is being welcomed *to*.

It may be entirely too predictable that a Barth person like me would use this letter to complain about a lack of Christological specificity in American mainline churches. But a vague humanism isn’t enough to sustain the contemporary church, either in its own life as an institution or as a witness within a pluralistic society. Jesus must be more than a generalized model of the moral life, regardless of how much easier it is to talk about Jesus’ teachings – or, at least, the less controversial ones - than about the cross and empty tomb. For us, and for our churches, God is not and cannot be a vague deity who creates and then watches human events from afar. References to “the divine,” without reference to who we believe God to be, without being rooted in the particularity of our story, are ultimately unconvincing. We have been shown precisely who God is, in the revelation of Scripture as the Word of God. God is, in the words of our parishioner, friend, and neighbor Robert Jenson, “whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

It is as problematic to speak of “the human” apart from Christ as it is to speak of “the divine” apart from the Trinity. Stanley Hauerwas, commenting on Karl Barth’s “apocalyptic humanism,” writes, “Jesus is no image or symbol of the general reality of the human exactly because he is a singular reality, not an instance of a more universal principle. . . . accordingly, Jesus cannot be judged from some general, ostensibly human point of view, but rather every human being must be regarded from the point of view of this particular man.”<sup>2</sup> Just as God cannot be boiled down to a vague, aloof divinity, the Christian life cannot be reduced to a vague humanism that promises incremental improvement to those whose lives are going well. The Christian life promises an utterly transformed life in Christ to those for whom sin, both individual and structural, is real - that is to say, to all of us.

After one memorable meeting about “community,” I had the opportunity to give a lecture to a group of Episcopal clergy on the topic of “formation for the church today.” I used

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth* (University of Virginia Press, 2022), 26.

a little essay by Robert Jenson called “The Return to Baptism” in *Encounters with Luther*. Drawing on the Large Catechism, he writes, “baptism is the casting of the old into the waters and the appearance of the new. Not just in Luther, but in the whole tradition, baptism has never been understood as merely the beginning of new life. Baptism is that ending of the old and beginning of the new which is life... the old life ends when I submit myself to the waters, and the new self is an eschatological self, a self in the kingdom, a self in the Spirit.” While there is an absolute once-and-for-all aspect to the sacramental act, the Christian life after baptism does not exist on an upward trajectory where we never again have to return to these questions. Specifically, he says, “How do we return to baptism?” The answer is simple but wrenching: “Give up your past life again to the judgment of God, as you did when you first gave up yourself to the waters,” where in the pattern of the sacraments we apprehend again “the death of the old and the birth of the new.” There is no room for a narrative of progress here, and no room for a theology of baptism that marks a beginning but not an end, a welcome without true transformation. Here, the old Adam must die, and die, and die again.

What happened when I said these things out loud in front of a group of Episcopal clergy was interesting to say the least. Most people thought it was exactly right. “Why don’t we hear more of this from the pulpit? I need to hear this,” exclaimed the one lay person in the room. But one priest said he was “shocked” (in a bad way) to hear someone talk about sin and judgment so vehemently in a “progressive” context. I replied that we should talk about it more, and then perhaps it won’t be so shocking. He was not satisfied by this answer. However, this is the gift that pastor-theologians like Jenson and Barth gave to us, and to me: the gift of truthful and courageous speech about the reality of God and the reality of the human condition, the gift of the true story in a world that has lost its story.

They taught us that theology should be theological. That is to say, theology should be about God, and not a form of psychology, sociology, or politics shouted in a loud voice. At the same time, he taught us that the theological worldview permeates every aspect of how we live our lives: personal, familial, political, and cultural. And, he has taught us all that theology cannot exist without the Church. On all these points, Jenson and Barth continue to speak to us together against some of the most troubling, and not particularly new, currents in the discipline. One of the most whimsically true instances of this kind of theological speech can be found in Jenson’s book for children (and grownups) *Conversations with Poppi About God*, an extended interview with his then eight year old granddaughter, Solveig.

I love that little book. I love it so much that I gave a copy to my godson Robbie at his baptism. I love it so much that I want Trinity Church to give a copy to every child baptized in our parish. I am not entirely kidding when I say it’s his *magnum opus*, because if a theologian can’t answer the questions of an eight year old in a way that she can understand, even an eight year old as precocious as Solveig, then he doesn’t actually understand what he’s doing on the deepest level. But Jens understood. That act of translation shows the depth of his gifts.

At one point, Solveig and Poppi are talking about the Nicene Creed, and in particular about the line “through him all things were made.” At that point Solveig says, “Well, I would

like to say that Jesus is not the one who wrote the many movies Daddy is writing. He did not write your systematic theology.” Poppi responds, “That’s certainly true. But that’s the same point we had earlier, isn’t it? In one way, we do what we do, but we would not do it if it were not for God.”

The most pressing question for the Church today is perhaps the same question that it always has been. To use Jenson’s language, would we do it – whatever “it” may be in our ecclesial life – if it were not for God? What difference does God make? More to the point, what difference does Jesus Christ make, not as a vaguely good idea or an inspirational model, but as the Savior and head of the Church? What difference does baptized life in Christ make to the Church, not as merely a well-intentioned social group, but as a body of people who are made a new creation in Jesus Christ? These have always been questions that confront the Church, but perhaps they confront us now more than ever.