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# BULLETIN

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## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS: EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

By Barry D. Smith, student at McMaster Divinity College.

The thirty-third annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society was held in Toronto, Ontario, hosted by Ontario Theological Seminary. A great host of evangelical scholars met December 28–30 for the purpose of discussing the theme of the relation between the two testaments. This topic obviously had wide appeal since approximately three hundred attended. The conference included five plenary sessions, in which two scholars read papers, as well as four parallel sessions which people attended according to individual interest.

Starting things off on a rather lively note in the first plenary session, Paul Feinberg of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School gave a rebuttal to the thesis of Daniel Fuller's recent book, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum*. Feinberg argued that there was no continuum, only contrast. It was unfortunate that Fuller could not have been present — the telephone debate was less than ideal. Nevertheless, Fuller was able to defend his position quite well and even answer questions from the floor. It will be very interesting to see what type of reception Fuller's thesis receives from the evangelical world in the future. Whereas in the past dispensationalists and covenantalists could at least unite on the basis of soteriology, it would seem that Fuller's position will alienate him from both camps. The general consensus of the participants at the conference was that he was advocating, at least partially, a works-righteousness soteriology.

Also of significance was K. L. Barker's announcement in his presidential address that he had moved from his earlier strict dispensationalist view (concerning the relation between the law and gospel) to a middle position which is a hybrid of dispensational and covenant theology. It would seem, then, that the polarization which has historically divided evangelicals is being dismantled. The polarization is being replaced by a theological spectrum in which it is possible to locate oneself anywhere between the two poles of dispensationalism and covenant theology. Barker's plea at the start of his address was symptomatic of this shift: he asked for a mutual tolerance and spirit of "brotherhood" to exist between the two camps. Such a theological detente, if realized, would create a less doctrinaire climate and thus would contribute to a new plurality. Both Fuller and Barker seem to be headed in this direction.

Greg Bahnsen, who before the conference was victim to some nasty rumors concerning his views promoting the use of OT laws in modern society, presented and defended his theonomic thesis very competently. It turned out that Bahnsen was simply arguing an historical Reformed view of the relation between the Old and New Testaments, a view which held that we must assume a continuity except where otherwise stated. Although he won a unanimous decision in his debate with Paul Feinberg, Bahnsen's position still requires further evaluation.

Clark Pinnock also presented a paper on the internal development of tradition within Scripture. Orthodoxy in the past has often assumed the Bible to be a static record of revelatory truth. Pinnock's thesis that the Bible is in fact a very dynamic book suggested new possibilities for consideration.

In summary, there is no doubt that the Evangelical Theological Society's thirty-third annual meeting was a great success. Judging by the quality of the work presented, evangelicalism is a very vibrant intellectual force, not lacking in talent. Moreover, evangelical theology is facing some changes, perhaps both good and bad. It will prove most interesting to keep an eye on developments. The seeds of future debate, but hopefully not controversy, have been sown.

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION

(Probing questions, suggestions and encouragement in areas of personal and spiritual growth)

### THE SPIRITUAL PEDAGOGY OF HENRI NOUWEN

By John S. Mogabgab, Research Fellow at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota.

#### Introduction

It is always with a mixture of childlike curiosity and good-natured skepticism that Henri Nouwen receives notice of articles or courses devoted to various aspects of his work. He feels that in his writings and lectures he is only reiterating the basic truths about the Gospel, and fears that interest in his own thought could be a distraction leading people away from God's Word. This concern has grown as his reputation has increased. I remember him once applying to himself one of his own distinctions as he wondered whether he was more in the way of the Gospel than the way to it. It is, therefore, with a certain sense of irony that I offer these reflections on the work of Henri Nouwen.

During the five years in which we worked together at Yale Divinity School, I was most closely associated with Henri's teaching and writing. These are two aspects of the same activity, which might best be described as a spiritual pedagogy. Henri does not consider his writings or his courses "scholarly" in the technical sense. As I came to know him more intimately, I began to see him as an artist of the Christian life who with words and gestures (indeed, many gestures!) seeks to sculpt the spiritual sensibilities of his students and readers. In him the disciplines of the artist and the educator find a personal synthesis. In what follows, I would like to explore this synthesis by describing some of the principles that have shaped Henri Nouwen's teaching ministry at Yale.

During the Fall semesters of 1977 and 1978, Henri participated in regular day-long conferences with Parker Palmer, then Dean of Studies at Pendle Hill (the Quaker community and study-center near Philadelphia). Their theme was "Education and Community." The purpose of these meetings was to reflect upon the relationship between the process of education and the formation of community, and to articulate, if possible, a Christian spirituality of teaching. It was during one of these conversations that Henri formulated a definition of teaching that nicely summarizes his own pedagogical intention: "To teach is to create a space in which obedience to the truth is practiced."

#### Creating A Space

Henri has always been sensitive to the physical space in which his classes are conducted. The room should be comfortable, pleasant and adaptable to the format of the course. Henri knows that physical space has a profound influence on the quality of personal encounters, and he therefore always seeks out the most inviting classrooms for his students.

But beyond this physical dimension, the space in which his classes meet should be structured by prayer. The varying combinations of biblical readings, silence and prayers which always begin his classes reflect Henri's deep conviction that it is the Lord who has brought us together and given us this time to become better acquainted with Him. For Henri, the period of prayer

at the start of each class involves much more than the effort to establish an atmosphere of interior quietude, although that is certainly important. Rather, prayer is a conscious acknowledgement that precisely here and now the promise of Jesus to his disciples is being fulfilled. "Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them" (Matt. 18:20). The discipline of prayer at the outset of each class is thus intended to create a space in which the students' attention will be directed to the one in whose Name they desire to minister.

There is a third level at which Henri seeks to fashion the space, a level supported by the physical setting and given meaning by the prayers. This third level involves the assigned readings, and, more importantly, the lectures. To paraphrase a line from *The Living Reminder*, Henri's presentations aim at giving the students a space in which to dwell and move around so that they can find their own place in it. Within the space shaped by the lecture, Henri seeks to point out the often unnoticed points of contact between typical human experiences and the deeper reality of God's Spirit at work in the world. Just as the early Christian writers could appeal to a common fund of philosophical categories, methods of thought, and cultural ideals to introduce the educated person of their day to the truths about Christianity, so Henri is able to use such daily experiences as loneliness, anger, joy, friendship and busyness to instruct his students in the ways of the Spirit and to persuade them of the essential relation between spirituality and ministry. Henri himself most often describes this effort as an attempt to help students begin to see the

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### **To teach is to create a space in which obedience to the truth is practiced.**

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connections between their own life stories and the one great story of God's redemption of the world in and through Jesus Christ. The many pastoral examples, personal anecdotes, psychological observations and theological analyses that go into building the floor, walls and ceiling of Henri's lectures are aimed at helping the students gain a new vision of their vocation as Christians. Henri's description of stories in *The Living Reminder* expresses well the way his lectures are intended to function: "The story confronts but does not oppress; the story inspires but does not manipulate. The story invites us to an encounter, a dialog, a mutual sharing . . . (It) opens a door and offers us space in which to search and boundaries to help us find what we seek, but it does not tell us what to do or how to do it" (p. 66).

#### **Practicing Obedience To The Truth**

In Henri's spiritual pedagogy, the classroom, the prayer, and the lecture are all placed in the service of obedience to the truth. The phrase "obedience to the truth," used to characterize a particular pedagogy, could easily stimulate debate about the meaning of these elusive terms. Understood statically and impersonally, for instance, "obedience to the truth" could conjure up the image of religious ideology masquerading as genuine education. But for Henri, "obedience to the truth" has a meaning that is eminently concrete, dynamic and personal.

It was early in his work on the theme of compassion that Henri arrived at a simple yet rich understanding of obedience. Obe-

dience means hearing how much God loves us and responding to that love in the freedom that love creates (Cf. I Jn. 4:18). For Henri, obedience therefore involves a movement toward God in response to God's loving initiative toward us. That initiative is itself the truth because it fully expresses and embodies God's own being. And this truth became not only personal, but a person, in Jesus Christ. Obedience to the truth thus means the discipline of listening to God's Word with the patience and fidelity which express the love marriage partners have for each other.

Precisely because it is a discipline in the service of the personal relationship God has already established with us in Jesus Christ, obedience to the truth must be practiced. Here practice has the twofold meaning of the attainment of skill through repetition, and the actual application of that skill. If the classroom, the opening prayer, the assigned readings, and the lecture all combine to structure a space in which obedience to the truth can be practiced, it is the actual sharing of words and silence, insights and questions, hopes and doubts, that weave the fabric of this discipline. The formative dimension of Henri's spiritual pedagogy manifests itself precisely in the process of these interchanges between teacher and student.

To train students in the practice of obedience to the truth means for Henri that, in so far as possible, his own teaching must embody that practice. In an article on the spirituality of those who teach religion, he wrote: "To be a teacher means to have the same boldness as Paul, who said to the Corinthians: 'Take me as a model as I take Christ' (I Cor 11:1)." This understanding of the teacher as exemplar became central in monastic spiritual formation. In the earliest tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, we hear of Abba Theodore of Pherme, who said in connection with his young disciple: "As far as I am concerned, I do not tell him anything, but if he wishes he can do what he sees me doing" (Sr. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 85). According to Saint Benedict, the monastery is a *schola*, a space structured by fellowship, work, leisure and liturgy, in which service to God can be learned. In this school the Abbot serves as an exemplar whose model is Christ (*St. Benedict's Rule*, Prologue and Chapter 2).

Henri's spiritual pedagogy draws upon and attempts to embody these biblical and early monastic sources. It is interesting, therefore, that while students sometimes grouse about what they consider to be the one-sidedly "monastic" orientation of this or that course, they do not realize that the major aspects and basic form of Henri's entire educational ministry are profoundly monastic. For example, the elements of fellowship and leisure find expression in the weekly evening gatherings for wine, cheese and informal conversation at Henri's home, while the element of liturgy is present in the daily 5:30 PM Eucharist, and more recently, in the noónday prayer.

In all of this Henri is concerned with helping his students grow in their service to the Lord. For instance, he wants to promote in the students the realization that their ministry has already begun and is not a function of receiving the M.Div. degree or an official appointment in the church. Henri's understanding of the many opportunities for real ministry in the Yale Divinity School community lies behind his belief that the small groups are the most important element in the format of his large lecture courses. These small groups are important not because they offer a more intimate circle within a large number of students, or because they provide an opportunity for more intense discussion of the course materials. Rather, their importance is that they hold the promise of becoming crucibles of mutual ministry. Here, if anywhere, the attentive listening born of practicing obedience to truth can be learned and used in the service of Christ's Name.

#### **Converting The Questions**

During one of the Pendle Hill meetings on "Education and Community," Parker Palmer observed that for Christians, to search

for the truth means also to be searched by the truth. This insight was confirmed in Henri's own life. As he continued to probe Scripture for the meaning of compassion in contemporary ministry, he began to discover how deeply his own approach to the Good News had been shaped by psychological categories and presuppositions. Henri had studied for two years at the Menninger Clinic, and so was aware of the many valuable insights psychology has contributed to the pastoral ministry. At the same time, he realized that Christian spirituality should not be uncritically reduced to psychology. *The Living Reminder*, written in late 1976, was his attempt to affirm the value of psychological insights for ministry while distinguishing clearly between psychology and spirituality.

As the work on compassion continued, however, the practice of obedience to the truth brought Henri to a new awareness of the radical quality of God's Word and a new sensitivity to the pervasive influence of Freud, Jung and their theoretical legacy on the way we tend to perceive the meaning of the Gospel. This growing recognition of the impact of the "psychological age" on the patterns of his own thought helped Henri to notice similar patterns at work in his students. These patterns could be discerned in a number of the questions elicited by the lectures or readings. There was a tendency, for instance, to interpret ascetical language about self-emptying or the denial of self as a summons to engage in some form of repression of self. One could also detect an inclination in the classes to view spiritual disciplines primarily as instruments for the enhancement of personal growth rather than as ground-clearing exercises aimed at providing room for the Spirit to refashion us in the image of Christ. As Henri became more and more sensitive to this phenomenon in his own life and in the lives of the students, the task of "converting the questions" became increasingly central to his spiritual pedagogy.

The task of converting the questions is a delicate one. First, it requires a special attentiveness to the deeper resonances of a question. What might appear on the surface to be a straightforward enquiry about a particular spiritual technique or the application of a certain spiritual insight in the ministry could well conceal a fundamental pattern of thought that should itself be identified and made subject to scrutiny. Sometimes a question or comment reveals a spiritual concern or issue that is only indirectly suggested by the words themselves. Then a judgment is required about whether to address the explicit or the implicit problem voiced by the student.

Second, the task of converting the questions requires that they first be affirmed. As Henri observed in his article on the spirituality of the religion teacher, affirming the students' questions is part of helping them to discover that "their question is a human question, that their search is a human search, and that their restlessness is part of the restlessness of the human heart — your own included" ("Living the Questions," p. 21). The fact that questions need to be converted does not mean they are poor questions. Rather, it means that the questions raise real spiritual issues, but issues which the students themselves do not always recognize as such. Affirming the questions expresses Henri's pastoral concern that his converting the questions will be perceived as an aspect of spiritual formation rather than as a manipulative trick to avoid tough questions.

Behind the effort to convert the students' questions lies a spiritual principle which Henri considers basic to the Christian ministry. This is the principle of spiritual sobriety or vigilance, called *nepsis* in the early monastic tradition. Vigilance is the discipline of guarding oneself against the many false paths which can lead one astray in the pilgrimage toward maturity in Christ. Hence it is one of the essential conditions of growth in the spiritual life. Abba Poemen, one of the greatest of the Desert Fathers, could therefore say: "Vigilance, self-knowledge and discernment; these are the guides of the soul" (Ward, *Sayings*, p. 145). Vigilance is not, however, merely a defensive, self-serving spiritual posture. As

the word itself suggests, vigilance involves an alertness to the dangers of the spiritual life. But this is at the same time an alertness to the solid ground over which a person may pass safely. Vigilance aims at keeping clear the space in which obedience to the truth is practiced. It therefore enhances both self-knowledge and discernment, and in this way eventually enables a person to guide others through the landscape of the Spirit. For this reason, vigilance is crucially important for ministry. With it comes a capacity to speak a comforting, challenging or guiding word in a time marked by great hunger for — and yet greater confusion about — the Christian spiritual life.

To the extent that vigilance contributes to the capacity to see the ways of the Spirit in the marble texture of human life, it sharpens and expands the vision of the minister. In so far as vigilance is a discipline, it helps the minister share this vision with others. To help his students see and hear the truth of God's redeeming Word, and to provide them with some spiritual disciplines with which they might uncover this truth for others — these are the goals of Henri Nouwen's spiritual pedagogy.

## Conclusion

I began these reflections with the observation that in Henri the disciplines of the artist and the educator come together. Henri once observed that, "The art of sculpture is, first of all, the art of seeing . . . and discipline is the way to make visible what has been seen. Thus the skillful artist is a liberator who frees from their bondage the figures that have been hidden for billions of years inside the marble, unable to reveal their true identity." (*Clowning In Rome*, pp. 87–88). Although our new self in Christ may not have been hidden for billions of years, it is often as difficult to see and to make visible as the figures concealed in the sculptor's stone. That Henri wants to see and to make visible this new self in his students so that they can do this for those entrusted to their pastoral care is a mark of his artistry and reason enough to be grateful for his educational ministry at Yale Divinity School.

*Reprinted by permission from the January, 1981 issue of Reflection Magazine, the journal of Yale Divinity School. Since the writing of this article, Nouwen has moved to Peru to join in the life of a parish among the poor. He continues to have close ties with the Trappist monastery, The Abbey of the Genesee, in Pifford, New York.*

### URBAN EVANGELISM SEMINAR

A two-week seminar on Urban Evangelism will be held April 19–23 and 26–30, 1982 at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in Ventnor, New Jersey. Sponsored by Latin American Mission, World Vision, and the Overseas Ministries Study Center, the seminar will include featured lecturers Roger Greenway, Howard A. Snyder, Raymond J. Bakke, and William Pannell. The first week will focus on the Third World Context, and the second week will focus on the North American Context. Participants are welcome to attend one or both weeks. For application and more information, write the Overseas Ministries Study Center, P.O. Box 2057, Ventnor, NJ 08406.

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