



Prologue

Why Dialectics?

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.

ROBERT BROWNING,
Bishop Blougram's Apology

*Moses replied, . . . "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets
and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"*

NUMBERS 11:29

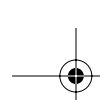


A while back my son asked me to write out the basic convictions I have sought to live out in my Christian faith. This book is the response to his request. It outlines the inner dialogue I have exercised over many years, expressed in six essays that are arranged dialectically in three parts: "Responding to the Christian Faith" (which is hidden and yet open), "Challenging our Culture" (which is publicly surreal and so must become personally real) and "Maintaining the Christian Faith" (both in communal expression and personal transmission). Each essay in turn contains its own inner dialectics. For example, faith is hidden yet not underground, personal yet not individualistic and so on.

WHY THE GENRE OF DIALOGUE?

Our postmodern society is in a state of reaction against monologue, neg-





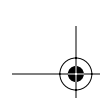
actively associating it with ideology. The parade of “isms” has flattened all the perspectives and attitudes of the human condition into one social absolute, variously described in the past century as socialism, Marxism and fascism, and now manifested as fundamentalism, liberalism and even secularism. The rise of the individual, together with the shift from an elite culture to a mass culture, indeed a “pop” culture, encourages everyone to have a voice so that we can all argue and respond to everyone else. A family today no longer practices the adage that “children should be seen but not heard.”

Even the author of a book is no longer a sole communicator. What you as a reader get from a book may not be what the author intended to communicate, because your reading is filtered through all your own experiences and relationships. This has always been true, but today the individualism of the reader is more articulated than before. We all put up defenses against reality, blocking what we don’t want to take in and selecting what we do want to hear, read or know.

Dialogue, then, is a way we can express our own perceptions and values. We do this both with other people and individually in soliloquy with ourselves. Indeed, as social beings we cannot be personal without living together in dialogue. This is certainly the married way of life. Rita, my wife, is always refusing to accept things at face value—especially my unsupported opinion! Dialogue is just this: engaging in discussion to promote and deepen the personal dimension of living together, even when our viewpoints are not the same.

The dialectic genre enables us to see truth in multifaceted ways. Like Job, we must often refuse to accept the foolish platitudes of the worldly-wise who presume to express the ways of God. The preaching from our pulpits commonly continues to be made up of clichés and generalizations, and the radical changes taking place in our culture make it more difficult for teachers and pastors to communicate unilaterally from a po-





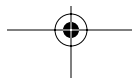
sition of authority. So I find it essential to use dialectics as an exchange between my own experiences and others', to test their validity. (See the appendix for further reading on dialectics.)

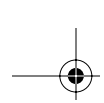
INVERSE DIALECTICS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Increasingly, then, true Christian faith must be countercultural. We may have to forfeit our careers, some of our friends, even our freedom if we are to remain true to the Christian convictions placed within us by God's Spirit. Through the Christian inverse dialectic, we are constantly reminded of our status as strangers and pilgrims in this world who seek one to come. It is in antithesis to the world that we are in resonance with heaven. That is why we are joyful exiles; we have another, better home, a more glorious destiny.

What most of us lack is not knowledge of the faith but the spiritual determination to carry out what we already know, regardless of the personal consequences. Truth is a matter of life or death—what we are willing to live or die for. Can anything express the truth if it is not lived? Does truth float around as a disembodied concept? As Søren Kierkegaard saw it, much of what is publicized as Christianity is simply "poetry"—the real has been turned into the imaginary. True Christianity is turning the possible into the actual. This is the role of the prophet, to challenge us and call for obedience to the word of the Lord. This is why the Christian life is a subjunctive life. Our own feelings and desires have to be replaced and indeed redeemed if we are to enter into the indicative or prophetic reality of Christian life. Moses' words have haunted me most of my life: "Would God that all the LORD's people were prophets!" (Num 11:29 KJV).

Therefore, an inverse dialectic does not just involve us debating with each other. It is God debating with us, as Job was finally forced to recognize. It is not just understanding the faith, but living it out within the daily vicissitudes of personal relationships. Speculation and existence,

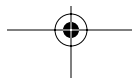


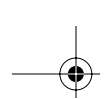


understanding and action, poetry and prophecy, the earthly and the eternal—all of these uneasy tensions express what it means to “become a Christian” in an ongoing process. It is not enough to express personal convictions and principles. We can remain in a Gnostic or Cartesian iron cage by merely thinking about the faith and making cognitive claims for our principles.

As Jonathan Edwards realized, true affections for God are gracious affections, for they are divinely implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. During the religious revival in which Edwards was engaged, too many emotional outpourings were being attributed to God when they were merely forms of psychological release. Likewise, we can speak of our Christian convictions and principles only as graciously given us in God’s Word by his Holy Spirit. We did not create them, nor can we naturally will to receive them. Indeed, in sharp contrast with Platonism, we cannot assume the truth is innately within us, ready to be disclosed by speech. Rather we can express the truth only when it has been imparted personally to us by God’s Spirit.

Nor are such convictions and principles given to us simply because we call ourselves Christians. They develop as God calls us personally by name. The cost of this process is the experience of being solitary, for before God we are primarily alone. Our relationship with God does not at first unite us with our fellows; it separates us. Therefore as Christians we are never more our true selves than when we are most “in” Christ Jesus. There our personal uniqueness is caught up in the reality of God’s love for us, and only then does the Christian life become communal. The more assuredly we are in Christ, the more decisively we will do what the truth calls us to do. Our uniqueness and our growth in holiness go together. On the other hand, the less sense we have of our unique identity in Christ, the more indecisive, compromising and shallow we will be, and the more we will accept the popular consensus. We will remain con-





tent in the crowd, following what others do and behaving within the norms of conventional morality.

THE GIFT OF BEING JOYFUL EXILES

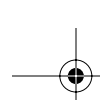
Christians are finding themselves increasingly marginalized by the spread of secular humanism. Yet the motif of exodus has always been the reality of God's people. "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14). Loneliness is an inevitable result of our uniqueness, yet it provides space in our lives for God's presence. The Christian has a unique experience of joy, for as the psalmist reminds us, in God's presence is fullness of joy (Ps 16:11). This is an endowment the crowd can never give us, the gift of the joy of personal salvation. Sometimes it is the "joy that seekest me through pain," as George Matheson expressed in his hymn "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go." This joy is not mere resignation to affliction, but a sublimation and expansiveness of soul that is deeply settled in God's love beyond the reach of sufferings. It comes as we share in Christ's sufferings as a way of life.

True joy can never be selfish, for it is a shared social reality. When what is lost is found again, as Jesus narrates in the parables of the lost coin, sheep and beloved son, there is great rejoicing. Joyfulness gives off a health-imparting fragrance that enlivens others. The difference between joy and happiness is that joy is a transcendence of spirit in the experience of God's love, whereas happiness is a more immanent response to a conducive environment. One is life changing, the other remains fickle.

But ultimately, like the words *love* and *peace*, *joy* is indefinable, a presence that cannot be abstracted into an idea. The great theologian Karl Barth points this out:

Our starting point is the fact that life is a movement in time—the



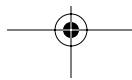


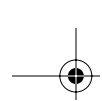
movement of continual striving and desire for small or great ends, for new or distant goals, as guided by specific ideas, wishes, relationships, obligations and hopes. Joy is one of the forms in which this movement is arrested for a moment or a few moments, not on its objective but its subjective side, in the awareness in which man experiences himself in the fulfillment of this movement.

In other words, joy is the experience of going home like the prodigal son, of fulfilling the purpose of our creation and re-creation for God's glory. At the swine trough, pain is looking at ourselves; on the journey home, joy is gazing at the Father's love. Being joyful then is the expression of our life's fulfillment as determined by God, which at various stages of our journey we stop to enjoy and be refreshed by. The experience of joyfulness is a test of whether we are going the right way to our final destination. Joy anticipates God's love. Without hope in God, we close ourselves to joy.

We can act like Scrooge and exclude joy from our wintry lives, until repentance—the awakening to love—redirects our journey into the summer season. We can create opportunities for joy through our hospitable attitudes and kind actions, as the film *Babette's Feast* so beautifully depicts. I know someone who gives china dishes to Christian couples; this person is committed to promoting hospitality in large cities, to lighting candles in dark places. The Sabbath day is another prime opportunity to celebrate the joy of the Lord. Festivities filled the religious life of Israel, and festal joy continues to imbue true Christian community. Joy is truly a socially divine reality. It must be shared; its dictum is "rejoice with me."

True joy is also expressive of righteousness. It cannot be celebrated in the loss of personal integrity. It cannot be exercised at the expense of conscience. It ultimately celebrates our fear of the Lord, what God's





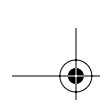
Word has determined for our well-being and that of our neighbor. Our true pleasure lies in that which gives God pleasure. True joy is being Christlike, for the Father's acclamation has been given: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Lk 3:22). The Father anticipated that the Son would fully glorify him in his Passion, and Jesus prayed that his disciples would "have the full measure of my joy within them" (Jn 17:13). This is an incredible request when we contrast it with our petty complaints and refusal to live a sacrificial life. We need the hymn of the German Pietist Paul Gerhardt to both inspire and rebuke us: "Go forth, my heart, and seek thou joy!" Hence the fundamental basis of this joy is to take up our cross and follow Jesus in his love.

It is, then, an eschatological joy we anticipate. Here on earth we get hints and glimpses of eternal joy, which causes us to ever be restless and dissatisfied with our status as mere earthlings—we have a heavenly destiny. Joy is a new way of being, of self-sacrifice, of lifting our eyes toward the eternal, of looking beyond the things of this world, of accepting our light afflictions joyfully for his sake. It is fulfilling the prayer of Jesus that we abide in the Father and the Son through the Spirit, "so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11). It is, states the apostle Peter, "an inexpressible and glorious joy" that though you and I have not seen Jesus Christ, we believe in him (1 Pet 1:8).

LIVING ON THE DANGEROUS EDGE OF THINGS

But we still live in this world, on the dangerous edge of things. Soon after it was released in 1948, Jacques Ellul's book *The Presence of the Kingdom* helped me see the liveliness with which God's presence can enter into all aspects of culture. It turned my shallow mindset of seeking to escape from the "worldliness" of a few taboos into a desire for a redemptive encounter with the world's problems. Our Lord prayed not that the Father would take us out of this world, but that he would preserve us within it.





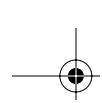
If Christians have no engagement with the world, then its future is bleak. We need to be sober and watchful, not seeking “solutions” but rather changed lives that can change the world. Only then can we introduce a new awareness of God’s presence. A sinful world is a messy world, full of inconsistencies and uncertainties that get overlooked when we generalize theoretically about our “Christian worldview.” Rather, we live in a “life-world” that is comprehensive, contingent and full of apparent contradictions.

When the poet Robert Browning spoke of “the dangerous edge of things,” he was referring to a fear of paradox, an inability to see more than one side of a person or situation: “the honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist”—and, we might add, “the popular Christian.” Utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick was Browning’s Victorian contemporary, and there was a jest that “he never could distinguish between the kind of contradiction that was just a contradiction and the kind that was a vehicle of the profoundest truth.” His was the fear of an ideologue, a fear that any breakdown of traditional thought would breach the dike and flood the world with new and dangerous ideas. Perhaps many “isms” grew out of the dread of revolution, as the French Revolution remained a raw memory in the Victorian age.

Analogous to the French revolution is our current fear of postmodernism, which has engendered a flood of skepticism. Indeed, postmodernism is associated with a far more radical revolt against God than what took place in the late eighteenth century. So the Christian today walks on the narrow edge between too rigid and doctrinaire a faith and a skepticism bordering on nihilism. Yet contemporary culture can challenge us positively to demonstrate the vitality of the gospel in fresh ways.

Perhaps it has always been difficult for devout Christians to hold truths tenaciously but with flexibility. It was easy for nominal Christians like Tennyson and Browning to blur the distinction between saint and

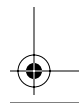
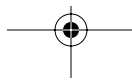
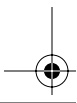


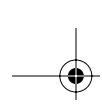


hero, viewing Christianity itself as heroic and holding a naive optimism about its progress. For us today, any countercultural critique will be unpopular. In that sense we continue to live “on the dangerous edge of things” when we dare critique religious populism today. For the unreality of contemporary popular religion in North America is perhaps greater now than it was even in Victorian England.

What then do we lean on when we live on the dangerous edge of things? Dante leaned on Beatrice. Robert Browning leaned on Elizabeth Barrett. Matthew Arnold leaned on Marguerite, as expressed in *Dover Beach* when the melancholic withdrawal of “the sea of faith” left “no certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” The poet could only respond, “Ah, love, let us be true to one another!” The assumption is that if you fall into doubt, then falling in love is an antidote. Better still, a woman’s love may lead you to God’s love. Personally, that has been my blessed experience for more than fifty years of marriage to my beloved Rita. Perhaps the boundaries between human and divine love can act as a bridge between mental skepticism and faith.

Today, with sexual and gender issues so confused and society so prone to divorce, many Christians have to live differently on their own dangerous edge of things. When male and female are homogeneously equal in public life, with no sense of biblical complement, the demand for equal rights becomes totalitarian and develops into a monotonous “each man/woman for himself/herself.” When we are forced to live on the narrowest edge of self-dependence, relying only on the isolated self and seeking to live confidently in our own functional identity, it is easy to fall into despair. We begin to discover how elusive the “self” is. As in Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*, the perennial question today is, “Who am I? What is my real self?” If our hidden formula to be a “self” is exposed and punctured like a balloon, do we fall into our own abyss? Do we live with boredom—the antithesis of joy—and accept an unexamined, superficial or



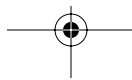
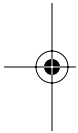


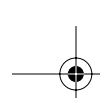
even meaningless existence? Or do we awaken from our dreams to try to reconstruct another answer?

Since the great disjuncture brought about by the Second World War and the apocalyptic fears of the Cold War, many people live in a montage of cut-up discontinuities. They channel-surf with no sense of time's continuity, experiencing only shattered fragments that are inconsequential and make the idea of "history" archaic. Perhaps the current literary renaissance of biography—and there are excellent biographies being written—reflects a cultural need for continuity and a cohesive environment that is no longer evident. The collapse of standards and convention of any kind makes economics our natural destiny, rather than the serious pursuit of moral character.

Our immediate past seems to be a great chasm separating us from previous history. As novelist William Golding observes, "Belsen, Hiroshima and Dachau cannot be imagined. . . . Those experiences are like black holes in space. Nothing can get out to let us know what it was like inside. . . . We stand before a gap in history, a limit in literature." New genres and literary experiments seem necessary: literary stories, personal stories, historical narratives, poetic intuitions, meanings, myths and journalistic reports—all to convince ourselves that reality has not become a black hole in space.

Certainly to dwell on such shadows of foreboding and uncertainty is to live dangerously on the edge and seems more suited to the hero than the saint, for we identify the hero with peril but the saint with joyous peace of mind. But Christians who know themselves to be sinners can never conceive of themselves as heroes! Graham Greene, the Catholic novelist, tried to do so, presenting his fascination with flawed yet idealistic characters in his writings. Perhaps he was describing the divided loyalties that develop in our lives from childhood. And today, our cultural pursuit of "Christian leadership" may represent another spurious





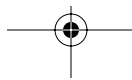
effort to make the Christian faith a heroic enterprise.

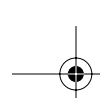
But it is also living dangerously to write in a confessional genre. It is a balancing act between what must remain hidden in my own soul in trust to God and what can be made public to encourage others. We can think of our life as like a musical score, appreciating what Elgar wrote at the foot of his composition *The Dream of Gerontius*: “This I have seen and heard; this is me!” Likewise in the composition of our faith, we need to confess, “This is what I have lived; indeed, this is who I now want to be.”

THE RHETORICAL PERSUASION OF LITERATURE

As you will see in the following essays, I have found that great literature can enlarge our horizons concerning the human condition. As Werner Jaeger has pointed out, artistic expression “alone possesses the two essentials of educational influence—universal significance and immediate appeal.” It has the power that the Greeks called *psychagogia*, the expression of the sublime in luminosity, symbol and a superior order of being. In no way should this eclipse the basic and unique importance of the Scriptures. But with the familiarity of biblical authority there can grow a narrowness and moral complacency that needs to be challenged by the cultural complexities of human life. Poetry, literature, drama and art can help us explore these complexities, just as Jesus spoke in parables to challenge the moral complacency and conventional values of his times.

Direct assertion and dogmatic affirmation can become mere religious chatter that does not shock and challenge us as we may need. Kafka wrote to his friend Oskar Plook in 1904, “I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place?” If it is only to make us happy, then we could find happiness more readily





in other diversions. No, he concluded, “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”

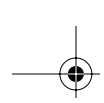
Identification with literary characters can reveal more comprehensively the full moral consequences of our own choices and actions. They are often spelled out in narrative and biographical form in a way that fits into our own personal situations. We may see the need to exorcise our own demons by seeing them depicted in the characters of the story. At the same time, literary escape into the plot helps us see how hard it is to face ourselves directly; the indirect approach—like the parable—can challenge us from behind our defenses.

Narration helps us reflect on the mistakes of others and warns us not to repeat them. As Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk writes in *The White Castle*, “You cannot embark on life, that one-off coach ride, once again when it is over. But if you have a book in your hand, no matter how complex or difficult to understand that book may be, when you have finished it, you can, if you wish, go back over the beginning, read it again, and thus understand that which is difficult and, with it, understand life as well.”

If God could use an ass to speak to Balaam, perhaps he can use a novel to teach us to accept life-changing events. A novel by William Golding helped change the whole course of my Christian service. And I’ll never forget the prophetic confrontation I experienced in reading Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. I read the novel twenty years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I became convinced then that Marxist ideology could never last. Yet it was written a generation before socialism arrived in Russia.

In the novel, the older brother, Ivan, represents the future socialist engineer of Soviet society who believes that Christianity is harsh and theoretical. In contrast, the saintly elder Zosima communicates a very different picture of Christian life, one that is tangible and personally real.





Prologue

As Dostoyevsky wrote to his publisher:

I will force [the Russian socialists] to admit that a pure and ideal Christian is not an abstraction but a tangible, real possibility that can be contemplated with our own eyes, and that it is in Christianity alone that the salvation of the Russian land from all her afflictions lies.

It is a message we still need to hear today.

