Dear friends and colleagues,

The Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology (CCET) exists to cherish and promote the one apostolic faith in its classical traditions. We believe that among many Christians, there is a love for the one apostolic faith that transcends the divisions in Christ’s church on earth. Here at CCET, we try to serve the unity of the church and the reconciling of divided Christians by promoting classical ecumenical theology. We do so through our Annual Pro Ecclesia Conference, our Pro Ecclesia books, and our journal, Pro Ecclesia.

This winter issue of our CCET newsletter contains David Yeago’s banquet address from last spring’s Annual Pro Ecclesia Conference. Dr. Yeago spoke of Robert W. Jenson, now of blessed memory. He spoke of Jenson as a seminary teacher. It was a moving speech. I think it will be a joy for you to read—both for those of you who personally knew Jenson and those who knew him only through his writings.

This issue of our newsletter also announces next spring’s Annual Pro Ecclesia Conference: “What’s the Good of Humanity? Explorations and Articulations of Christian Wisdom.” The Conference is set for June 3-5, 2019 at Loyola University, Baltimore. Please put this conference on your calendars and aim to attend if at all possible. You can register now: http://www.e-ccet.org/pro-ecclesia-conference-2019-whats-the-good-of-humanity/

God be with you all.

In Christ,

Gregory P. Fryer
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I have been asked to remember and celebrate Robert W. Jenson this evening, my teacher, our teacher, the co-founder (with Carl Braaten) of this Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, whose wisdom and provocation have so often in the past been a high point of these Conferences. There have been many, many deserved tributes and retrospectives on Jens’s life and work since last September, and I’ve not found it easy to avoid repeating what has already been said many times.

Indeed, I’ll begin with my version of something that has often been lifted up, Jenson’s straightforward confession of the resurrection of Jesus. The gospel proclaims that the particular Israelite Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been set free from death and now rules over all things. Jenson’s theology begins with the affirmation that this proclamation is true. My own first encounter with his bumptious assertion of the gospel’s truth took place in 1980, in my first week at Gettysburg Seminary, still during orientation, when Jenson was meeting with new students to give us a preview of what we would be doing in systematic theology. Unsurprisingly, he presented the task of theology as reflection on the gospel and its truth. As he was illustrating what he meant by the “truth” of the gospel, a light-bulb went on in my head.

“For example,” he said, “if the gospel is true, then no steady-state cosmology can be true.” He did not, to my remembrance, explicate this puzzling claim, but in context that was unimportant. I did not know much in 1980, but I had read enough to know that in making such a statement, Jenson had broken the rules. It was one of the pillars of the mainline Protestant settlement with cultural modernity that faith and theology may never contradict “science.” The outward, bodily world was the domain of secular reason and its science; theology did not make claims about that world, but only about the inner world of experience, feeling, values, and attitudes. Faith might be a stance towards the world, but it made no claims about the world. If the gospel was “true,” it had to be true in some other way. To say otherwise was to out oneself as an ignorant fundamentalist barbarian.
Yet here was Professor Jenson, clearly neither a fundamentalist nor a barbarian, fairly obviously even on first meeting the broadest and deepest intellect any of us had ever encountered, calmly asserting that the gospel was true in such a way that it could be incompatible with other claims about the way things are. Matthew Burdette and others who knew Jens later in life have recalled him saying that gospel is true “in the dumb sense,” that is, in the ordinary-language meaning of the term. In his words to us in 1980, Jens was telling us that the gospel claims that it is the case that Jesus has triumphed over death, and that his triumph has consequences for the so-called “real world.”

Notice that Jenson was speaking, not to prospective academics, but to incoming seminary juniors, candidates for the MDiv and MAR degrees. When I have talked to fellow Gettysburg alumni/ae who did not go on to be professors, but have served now for decades as parish pastors, this is also what they remember: their surprise at discovering that Jenson just believed that it was true that Jesus is risen – “in the dumb sense.” One pastor told me that his church-related-college religion professors had made it clear to him and his friends that no one who counted believed that. Before encountering Jens, he said, “We didn’t know that smart people believed that Jesus rose from the dead.”

I would like to go on from this point to remember and celebrate Jenson precisely as a seminary teacher who spent two decades preparing men and women for the Christian ministry. This is the only distinctive angle from which I can speak about Jens, having studied with him as an MDiv candidate and subsequently taught in a seminary setting myself for thirty years. Even though I have taught seminary students for longer than Jenson did, his teaching is still the gold standard for me. Not a week goes by that I do not orient myself by his example, and I believe that my students will testify that hardly a week goes by when I don’t quote him – usually something he said in class.

I have known less gifted theologians than Jenson who reacted to the seminary setting by perching a narrowly academic teaching of theology as it were on top of the MDiv curriculum. If Jenson chafed at the academic limitations of seminary teaching, we never saw it. He integrated the teaching of systematic theology with the study of ministry with what seemed unflagging enthusiasm.

He did not do this, it needs to be said, by dumbing anything down. Jens conducted celebrated seminars at Gettysburg which met in his home. They were great events, presided over by Jens and Blanche together, rendered convivial by their hospitality. They were also intellectually ambitious theological inquiries, in which students reported on and discussed primary theological texts from the Reformation to the present.
I remember my first seminar session with Jenson, also in 1980. As presentation topics were being assigned, Jens peered around the room in what seemed to me a somewhat predatory fashion and asked, “Now, does anyone here read Latin?” When I raised a trembling hand to admit that I did, Jens bounced in his chair and announced, “Ah! You will report on Brenz!” And so I found myself, in my first semester in seminary, sitting in the library before a great big leather-bound tome printed in the 17th-century, puzzling out the Christology of the Swabian Reformer, Johannes Brenz. As I said, there was no dumbing down or lowering of intellectual horizons.

What was remarkable about the seminars was that ministry students flocked to them. They were not small classes catering to a few oddballs like me, who aspired to PhD work. The Jensons’ living room was filled with students whose course was set towards a life of preaching and administering the sacraments, visiting hospitals, conducting church council meetings, instructing catechumens, and counselling people in trouble. It was these students who filled Jenson’s seminars, and he welcomed them.

All of us, whatever our aspirations, struggled to report clearly on such matters as the Christology of Brenz or the young Hegel or the metaphysics of Jonathan Edwards. Yet I never saw Jenson take the presentation away from a student who was floundering – and if you’ve ever taught, you know how tempting that is to do. He was always able to draw from the presenter what the class needed to have on the table for discussion. Jens had a not-undeserved reputation in those days for a certain abrupt bluntness, but his seminar teaching was a marvel of graciousness – as well as immense skill. And so MDiv students were welcomed to read Hegel and Edwards and Chemnitz and Brenz with Jenson, and they in turn found it worth their while to do so.

Jenson’s integration of systematic theology and the study of ministry arose from his theology’s core. Jenson’s was a theology of the gospel; our textbook, Story and Promise, was subtitled, A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus. Jenson made fully his own Luther’s insistence that theological study was not only the elaboration of doctrinal content but also preparation for authentic gospel utterance. He later made this point magisterially at the beginning of the Systematic Theology:

Theology is reflection on how to do something, and the thing to be done is to carry on with a specified message, whether as proclamatory word from God or as appeal of petition and praise to God, and whether with the signs of a language or with the gestures and meaningful objects of sacrament and sacrifice (ST 1:14).
Notice that on this account the whole life of the church and certainly the whole practice of Christian ministry are drawn within the scope of theology. If theology is critical reflection on a practice, it is hard to see how systematic theology could be anything but “practical.”

Accordingly, the distinction Jenson makes between systematic theology and what is usually called pastoral theology is pragmatic rather than principled. Both are forms of what he calls “normative” theology. Pastoral theology is “normative” theology attending to questions raised by the “exigencies of the church’s daily task,” while systematic theology takes up questions “posed not only by current urgency but also by perceived inherent connections of the faith” (ST 1:22; my emphasis). Take note of that “not only”: Jenson does not place any field or question of Christian practice outside the range of systematic theology. And this is not because he was an academic imperialist, but because there is no Christian theology that does not arise from reflection on the church’s defining enterprise of “get[ting] it across, in language, with signs other than linguistic…or by other behavior of our community, that Jesus is risen and what that means” (ST 1:5).

My time in Jenson’s classroom ended thirteen years before the publication of the *Systematic Theology*, through which Jens has exercised such an influence on a generation of younger theologians. It’s not unimportant for the interpretation of that great work that Jenson’s thought matured towards it during twenty years of teaching students for ministry. In that regard, the reminiscences of those of us who learned from him in that setting may have more than nostalgic significance.

We certainly encountered a determined Trinitarian theologian, and we were well aware that in expounding the doctrine of the Trinity, Jenson made claims about eternity and time which we found difficult to comprehend. That is the aspect of his work that is now best known and most discussed.

But those claims appeared in a broader context. We also encountered in Jens a theologian who had fully absorbed both the historical findings of the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement and its challenge to theologians to think less abstractly about sacraments and attend more closely to their character as ritual performance. I recall with satisfaction a January Term when Greg Fryer and I and some others read straight liturgical texts with Jens, from Bard Thompson’s *Liturgies of the Western Church*, inquiring what understanding of the event of worship and thus of the gospel was embedded in the rites themselves. The encouragement to think hermeneutically and theologically about liturgical practice and order had implications that reached far beyond liturgy narrowly conceived.
That class was a concentrated and formative but not isolated experience. Jenson’s teaching of systematic theology flowed naturally and inevitably into reflection on church practice. He provoked us to see that much more is involved in communicating the gospel than the pronouncement of correct doctrinal sentences. Sharp and often scathing commentary on familiar patterns of preaching and practice accompanied his exposition of theological loci. Thus *Story and Promise*: “In few ways does the church cripple its saying of the gospel as by the way it does the Eucharist” (169). Concrete examples follow. This critical edge of his teaching was accompanied by an invitation to faithful imagination: if the gospel is true, if Jesus is risen, then perhaps we might speak and pray and even conduct church business in ways that would otherwise be unthinkable.

The overall tenor of Jens’s seminary teaching is probably best represented by the most neglected of his major works, *Visible Words*, a Trinitarian theology of the more-than-linguistic communication of the gospel. That book opens with sixty pages of dense Trinitarian reflection on such matters as God’s embodiment and Christ’s presence. It continues with ritually concrete accounts of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, each of which culminates in detailed “liturgical proposals” which include model liturgical orders and texts. It will, I submit, be a challenge for future interpreters of Jenson’s thought to grasp that his Trinitarian theology issues in such attention to the details of practice by its own internal impetus.

What happened in the classroom in this regard did not take place in a vacuum. By the time I studied with him, Jens had long been deeply involved in forming liturgical practice in the seminary chapel. He had worked with the commission which produced the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and was at least the remote author of important liturgical texts. He also gave us a spirited example of liturgical practice; the student who wanted to learn practical liturgical leadership was well-advised to volunteer to assist Jens when he presided at the Eucharist. We heard his actual preaching of the gospel, and when preaching missed or distorted the gospel, we saw him sink down deeper and deeper into his seat, until sometimes only the top of his head was visible above the pew.

There was a twofold message in all this. First, Jenson brought us to realize that communicating the gospel is not easy or a matter of course. During that first encounter in 1980, I recall Jens saying that it was not too bad if a preacher succeeded in uttering the gospel on one Sunday out of four – and just managed not to do harm on the other three! When Jens defined theology as the thinking internal to the church’s task of communicating the gospel, the corollary was that communicating the gospel requires thinking.
In *Story and Promise*, with special point for seminary students, Jenson set forth the “simplest model” of theological reflection in this way: “Yesterday I said such-and-such, intending to be saying the gospel. How could I have done it better?” (*Story and Promise*, 190). Such questioning, he suggested, when addressed to the church as “How could we have done it better?” is unlikely to be popular. “Just when the church-school texts are nicely printed, or the church bureaucracy has again reorganized itself for better efficiency, along comes someone who has been doing some thinking, and says the whole thing is an inadequate service to the gospel” (*ibid.*). During Jenson’s years at Gettysburg, that “someone” in North American Lutheranism was very likely to be him, and no, it did not make him universally popular.

But the other side and more fundamental message of Jenson’s teaching was hope, hope specifically for the church, for the Christian congregation which preaches and baptizes, prays and praises, and gathers around the Table of the Lord. The ground of this hope is summarized in two sentences from *Story and Promise*: “If the gospel promise is true, its occurrence is the occurrence of Jesus as a shaping participant in our world. It is the truth of the gospel promise that it is the presence of the promiser” (160). The gospel promises that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has death behind him and lives to give himself to us, to deliver us from evil and grant us his own future. In Paul’s terms, what the gospel promises is Jesus’ own present rule as the Lord who must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). Only the living Jesus himself, therefore, can promise what the gospel promises; if the gospel is true, its utterance is his own intrusion into the world.

In and through the gospel-practices of the church, therefore, we come under the power of the one who has triumphed over death, the one whose triumphant crucified love will determine every future. The unlikely gospel-doings of unprepossessing Christian congregations constitute them the Body of Christ, the locus of his availability to the world and the world’s availability to him. The energy of these practices is the impetus of Jesus’ Spirit, the future-making Love which proceeds from the mutual faithfulness of Jesus and the Father, “the Power as which God is the active goal of all things” (ST 1:160).

This hope for the church, for the Christian congregation, is especially timely at this moment. We live in a day when the church’s visible brokenness and weakness can easily seem the whole story. Among Protestants in particular, there is a widespread sense that the plain old Christian congregation is not a competent agent of the church’s mission. We have all heard the litany of the ways in which Christian congregations miss the mark “missionally,” their stodginess and lack of imagination, their irrelevance and inadequate zeal. It is widely accepted that for real mission, we need *experts* who can bring to bear specialized techniques.
My seminary teaching began the year that Jenson left Gettysburg for St. Olaf; I have seen these forces at work in both so-called mainline and evangelically orthodox settings for thirty years. In theological education, the question is becoming critical: is there good reason to persist with the expensive and demanding preparation devised in order to form what Protestants once called “ministers of the word”? Or would the church’s mission be better served by schools which supplied students with a formulaic gospel and a toolbox of “church-planting” and “church-growth” techniques?

Jens himself saw the beginnings of these trends and commented on them, shall we say, pungently in many an editorial in *dialog*. I recall him writing of one denominational mission document something to the effect that it failed to consider that a community whose life anticipated the Kingdom of God might be differently related to its sociological setting than, say, the Elks Club. But the most “Jensonian” analysis of the situation is that this impatient activism is rooted in fear and loss of hope.

In *Story and Promise* he wrote, “If the gospel is not true, then when we hear it we hear only each other” (160). I believe that this pinpoints the fear or perhaps the resignation underlying much in contemporary church life. If in the preaching and practice of the church “we hear only each other,” then there is nothing for the world to hear but us. And if our words are going to accomplish anything in the world, then we are going to need all the chariots and horses we can buy from the Egyptians.

But – one can hear Jens say it – what if the gospel is true? What if Jesus lives? Then the gospel promise is his promise and its utterance is his presence. If Jesus lives, then the Christian assembly where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered is where all the interesting action is, or at least where it all begins. If Jesus lives, then there is no “mission of the church” besides the announcement and celebration of his victory – and no other is needed.

I shall end by setting against despair and resignation a single sentence fixed in my memory (at least in substance) from a sermon Jens preached at Greg and Carol Fryer’s congregation in the 1980’s: “When we proclaim Jesus’ resurrection,” he said, “we wield omnipotence.”

Thanks be to God. And thanks to you all.

~ David S. Yeago
Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics
North American Lutheran Seminary and Trinity School for Ministry
June 5, 2018
From a Christian perspective it could well be said that humanity, a good gift of God, is being undermined by the technology and thought-patterns and practices of contemporary Western culture. In response to what is seen as an attack, many books have been written (and conferences held) on the harm of these technologically-driven practices. These articles and books focus on what is wrong (with euthanasia, with surrogate motherhood, with the denial of the male-female difference, and so forth).

Yet to make a compelling cultural witness, it is more important for Christians to know what is right, and essential that they be able to articulate the positive. Why do babies matter? What is the goodness embedded in being made male and female? How can one approach death in a godly manner? We need, in other words, to be able to give an account of God’s “Yes” (2 Cor. 1:20), the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15).

Confirmed Speakers

- Patrick Lee, *The Soul in Scripture and Christian Tradition*
- Nancey Murphy, *What is the relationship of the brain, consciousness, and Christian faith?*
- Edith Mary Humphrey, *Male and Female, the Image of God, and the Significance of Children*
- Phillip Cary, *Chastity and the Wealth of Life: On Being Male and Female*
- Gilbert Meilaender, *On Dying*
- Donna Freitas, *Practicing Christianity in the Age of Facebook & Smartphones*

Panel Discussion

Banquet Address by Paul Hinlucky

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