

The Agenda:
8 Lessons from Luke 4
Bible Commentary



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Luke 4:1-15

Introduction

In 1988 an enormous controversy arose surrounding the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Martin Scorsese's screen adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's 1951 novel by the same title. Protesters marched in front of theaters, causing the film not to be shown in some cities. When it was released on video the next year, some video rental stores did not carry it because of threatened boycotts. Many Christian groups denounced the film.

What was it that bothered people so terribly in a movie about Jesus?

It may have been that much of the movie did not come from the Bible, but the writer of the book and the director of the movie never claimed otherwise. Perhaps the assumption of most readers of the Gospel is that Jesus was only tempted during the brief narratives that appear in Matthew 4, Mark 1 and Luke 4. In the film, the temptation depicted occurs while Jesus is on the cross.

Probably the element of the film that upset people most was that the temptation of Jesus had a sexual component, but why would people accept that Jesus had some kinds of temptations but not others?

In fact, the primary temptation of Jesus in the film was to use his power to come down from the cross and live out a normal life, including being married and having children. Much of the movie is a dream/vision he has, while hanging on the cross, of this life he might have lived. This normal life

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the Jesus character imagines could hardly be considered sinful, so why is it called a “temptation?”

The temptation narrative of the Gospels, particularly in Luke 4:1-13, may raise similar questions about the nature of temptation and what it means to be tempted.

Commentary

4:1-2

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The Gospel of Luke presents us with a very different portrait of Jesus than the other Gospels, which is the value of having multiple Gospels, of course. Luke’s Jesus is not in a hurry, like Mark’s, nor does he run around the world dodging the wrath of petty tyrants, like Matthew’s.

When the temptation narrative comes along, Luke’s Jesus is not “driven” by the Spirit into the wilderness, like Mark’s, nor is he “led” by the Spirit, like some external force, as in Matthew. In Luke 4:1, Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit,” who leads him internally. Mark’s sparse account of the temptation is ambiguous about its duration, while Matthew seems to present the temptation as something that happens after the 40 days of fasting, but Luke makes it clear that the temptation endures for all 40 days.

The presence of the temptation narrative in all three of the Synoptic Gospels presents some problems. All three place the temptation immediately following the baptism of Jesus.

Does this mean that Jesus was only tempted during this period?

All three present the content of the temptation differently. Mark produces no content at all, while Matthew and Luke depict the same three temptations, but in a different order. Does this mean that the content of the temptation narratives serves the literary and theological purposes of the separate Gospels, rather than simply reporting a thing that happened?

In Matthew, the 40-day period that precedes the temptation assists in portraying Jesus as a figure like Moses, who spent 40 days on Mount Sinai before bringing down the tablets of the Law, so Jesus ascends a mountain and preaches a great sermon right after the temptation. In Luke, the temptation is followed by the scene in Nazareth, an event in which Jesus will once again be tempted.

The word for *tempted* used by the narrator in Luke 4:2 could just as easily be translated as “tested.” This is the same Greek word used by the Septuagint at Genesis 22:1, when God “tempts” Abraham with the command to sacrifice Isaac, in Exodus 15:25 and 16:4 when God tests the Israelites in the wilderness, and in Exodus 17:17 when the Israelites test God. A slightly different form of the word is used in Deuteronomy 6:16 and quoted in Luke 4:12 about putting God “to the test.”

4:3-4

³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

It is difficult to determine why turning stones into bread was a temptation. Would it have been a sin for Jesus to do it? If he was hungry and isolated in the wilderness and had the power to make bread in this way, then what would have been wrong with doing so? After all, in each of the four Gospels, including Luke 9:10-17, Jesus miraculously produces bread for people who are hungry in an isolated place. In 1 Kings 17:8-16 Elijah miraculously provides bread for the widow in Zaraphath, her son and himself during a drought.

Origen, the great Christian teacher of the early third century, described this first component of the narrative as the temptation of gluttony, but this is a strange accusation to make against someone who has been fasting for 40 days and is tempted to make one loaf of bread. Jesus is actually accused of being a glutton in Luke 7:34, and does not deny the charge.

The text does not indicate that anyone else is around, so this does not seem to be a magic trick designed to gain cheap fame, like the upcoming second temptation. Furthermore, the response of Jesus, who quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, does not refer to physical hunger. Suppose that he had said to the hungry 5000, "One does not live by bread alone." The quotation in Matthew 4:4 continues with, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Perhaps Luke sees that this part of the quotation makes little sense in a situation of physical hunger and, therefore, omits it.

We probably cannot know precisely why this proposed act was a temptation. Within this story it may simply be because the devil proposed it, but it cautions us about claiming the power and promises of God too easily. Charles H. Talbert has said, "The devil in effect said to [Jesus] that the promises of God in scripture applied to anyone at any time and place, regardless of circumstances, if that person

would only claim them. Jesus refused to claim the promise. It was not appropriate for the moment."¹

This runs counter to a great deal of marketing of the Gospel, which presents it as a fast-track to all of God's resources.

4:5-8

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The nature of the second temptation is not entirely clear either. How much of what the devil says is true? Has he been given the "glory" and "authority" of "all the kingdoms of the world?" By whom? When? Can he give this glory and authority to "anyone I please"?

The common assumption that Jesus had a complete understanding of his identity can never withstand a close reading of the Gospels. If Jesus had clearly understood his identity as the Son of God, then this would have been no temptation at all. What was being offered was something less than what he already possessed. The ability to acquire political power in an instant is presented as a true temptation. The acquisition of such power and what Jesus could have accomplished with it would likely appear to be a good end.

Jesus responds not by objecting to the goals that are offered to him, but by objecting to the means of accomplishing them. This is one of the great temptations for individual Christians and Christian organizations in the modern world. The church is so often an inefficient organi-

zation that shortcuts to achieving its goals, such as manipulation, intimidation, and shading of the truth, begin to look like acceptable means. On the contrary, Jesus rejects an evil means of accomplishing what might be perceived as a positive goal, the establishment of his kingdom.

While Luke refers to the tempter as “the devil,” other Gospels call this character “Satan.” This name and the figure it designates are partially derived from the character in Job 1-2 who is called *hasatan*, or “the adversary.” At that point in the developing understanding of evil in the world, this character was understood as one of the heavenly beings who had a specific task, accusing human beings before God. This was not perceived as a negative role, but a necessary function of the heavenly court.

The eventual development of this character into an arch villain has been well documented by Greg Mobley and T. J. Wray in *The Birth of Satan: The Devil’s Biblical Roots* (New York: Macmillan, 2005). It is this arch villain who confronts Jesus in the wilderness of the Lukan narrative. In contrast, the Israelites in the wilderness faced the dual antagonists of God and the elements of nature. Luke’s audience sees Jesus face off against this embodiment of evil and win a decisive victory, before he goes back to his hometown to debut his ministry.

The second temptation becomes clearer as the Gospel of Luke progresses, and we discover, along with Jesus’ disciples, that Jesus is the suffering Messiah (Lk 9:21-22). The temptation here is to assume a false identity, an act which the text links to worshipping a false god.

Choosing to bow down and worship the devil is hardly a thought any of us would have, but the temptation to achieve success in a way that denies who we know we are is one of

the greatest temptations. This is the temptation for a preacher to preach a gospel of wealth and health, for a teacher to make the class easy for students, for a craftsman to sacrifice quality in order to increase production, and for any of us to neglect the obligations of family in order to advance more quickly in our careers.

4:9-12

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ¹¹‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

It is the second and third temptations that Luke places in a different order than Matthew. This move has several effects, any of which could be accidental or intentional.

Jesus’ references to Deuteronomy 6:13 in Luke 4:8 and to Deuteronomy 6:16 in Luke 4:11 are now in the correct order, and the temptations reach their climax at the temple in Jerusalem, an important place in Luke’s Gospel.²

It is probably of greater significance, though, that this order puts the temptation to “throw yourself down” from the pinnacle of the temple last and in closest proximity to the great sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30. It is surely significant that the climax of this following story also brings Jesus to a high place, a cliff, with the threat of being thrown off. Again, Jesus avoids a spectacle and simply walks away from the confrontation.

Looking at a later moment in the life of Jesus reveals even more about this kind of temptation. Given Jesus’ rejection

of fame in this third temptation, his actions on what has become known as Palm Sunday are surely puzzling. At this point, of course, the fame and adoration that Jesus receives has been earned with long, hard days of toil ministering in regions of Galilee and beyond. He has not achieved it by any shortcuts. Still, the story reveals how fleeting and worthless such fame is. By the last week of his life, Jesus seems to know that it is an unavoidable by-product of his life, not a goal that he has sought.

4:13-15

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

In the Gospel of Matthew angels rush to attend to Jesus when the temptation is over. Luke, on the other hand, will have no such attending. Instead, he concludes with the cryptic phrase “[the devil] departed from him until an opportune time.” Luke never expresses clearly when this time or times would be, but the account of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth immediately following presents plenty of temptations of its own.

Summary

The exploration of the nature of temptation in Luke 4:1-13, which points to inappropriate claims on the power and promises of God, denial of our identity as children of God, and the use of unsuitable means to achieve our goals, reveals that temptation awaits us at every turn.

Luke was probably the third of the New Testament Gospels

to be written, and it acknowledges, more clearly than Mark or Matthew, that Jesus’ temptation will continue. Only the Gospel of John was written after Luke, and it goes one step further, eliminating the well-known temptation narrative, and placing more overt temptations within the ongoing ministry of Jesus.³

Luke, like the other Gospels in the New Testament, is a narrative in which many kinds of conflict persist. Among these is the conflict within Jesus to be faithful to his identity and to allow his goals and achievements to flow out of that fidelity.

Perhaps our greatest struggle with the temptation narrative is that it does not match our own experience of temptation. Most of us probably think that if we knew we were looking at the devil face-to-face, being enticed to do something we knew for sure was wrong, then it would be easy to say no.

Our temptations come in different ways, though. Given a choice between two behaviors, it is not always clear that one is better than the other, or that one is clearly damaging to us or others. The ambiguity of some of our temptations raises questions about how we understand evil in the world.

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¹*Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, revised edition (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 148.

²These and other effects are also described in I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 166-167.

³Alan Culpepper, “Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9. Ed. Leander E. Keck. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 1-490.

Luke 4:16-17

Introduction

William Carey, cobbler turned preacher, delivered an inspiring sermon at a Baptist meeting in 1792. His sermon had just two points: expect great things from God; attempt great things for God. That sermon expressed not only the devotion of Carey to the cause of Christ but also captured the vision and imagination of those who heard it. As a result, they took the initial action that ultimately led to the formation of the British Missionary Society. The theme of Carey's sermon was picked up and utilized by others and served to shape the missionary spirit of Baptists for generations.

According to the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus appears among his own people proclaiming a message that announced the vision for his own life and ministry in service of God. In its own way, this sermon became a challenge to his disciples to share his vision. For centuries, his followers have prayed, served, endured, suffered, struggled and died in the process of trying to know and incarnate the call of living that vision. In this first decade of the 21st century, Baptists will be blessed in encountering this sermon anew.

Commentary

4:16a

When he came to Nazareth,

Ancient Nazareth, a village of no more than a few hundred people, lay 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee and 20 miles east of the Mediterranean in the southern section of the Roman province of Galilee. As many of the other small

towns in the area, it was situated on a ridge that was only three or four miles from Sepphoris, a major administrative center, and near a key trade route connecting Damascus and Egypt. The Greek New Testament regularly identifies Nazareth as a "city" (Greek: *polis*), but that was probably due to its importance to the story.

Scholars such as Richard Horsley have collected and analyzed archaeological data concerning ancient Galilee, including Nazareth, and have drawn helpful conclusions. While the area was inhabited from very early times, it did not attain the status of a village until the second or third century B.C.E. Earlier attempts to assess the evidence suggested a population of 1500-2000, but more recent evaluations indicate an upper limit of only 500.

The excavation of silos, olive and wine-pressing facilities suggests the community engaged in processing agricultural products. This and the proximity to a major trade route indicate commercial activity that resulted in the presence of non-Jews. Nevertheless, from its establishment Nazareth retained strong Jewish influence. Evidence indicates that after the Jewish revolt and destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., certain courses of priests resettled in the vicinity. This indicates a strong Jewish element at the core of the village.¹ Modern Nazareth boasts a population of more than 60,000 and truly is a city. Estimates are about half of this city is Arab Christian and half is Arab Muslim.

All four Gospels, in some manner, indicate a connection of Jesus and his family to this village (Mk 1:9; Jn 1:45). Matthew (2:23) and Luke (2:39; 4:16) link Jesus as a child to Nazareth. Luke regularly identifies it as the scene of important events. The annunciation to Mary takes place there (1:26), and it is the point of departure for Mary and Joseph as they begin their trek to Bethlehem (2:4).

The ancient Jewish traditions give no basis for supposing this small town would rise to the level of importance it attained in the stories of Jesus and in Christian history. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the Talmud or the writings of Josephus. Perhaps this lack of reputation accounts for the inconsistent and varied spelling in the New Testament of words (*Nazara, Nazarad, Nazarat, Nazareth*) that are typically translated “Nazareth.”

4:16b

where he had been brought up

This is not the only time the writer of Luke used the word translated “brought up.” In the other uses, its primary sense is “nourish” or “give nourishment.” It is used with this meaning in 12:24 where it depicts God as nourishing the ravens and in 23:29 where Jesus is anticipating a time of such great woe that those experiencing it would feel “breasts that never nursed” would be blessed. In Acts 12:20, the people of Tyre and Sidon are seeking reconciliation with Herod Agrippa because they “depended on the king’s country for food.”

In addition to establishing Jesus’ link with the little village, this phrase serves the larger purposes of this Gospel writer. On one hand, Luke considers the larger setting of the story of Jesus of true significance. It was important to the story that these events took place in the context of the Roman Empire: some when Augustus was emperor and others during the days when Tiberius reigned. Likewise, Jesus’ connection to a family expressed a significant aspect of Luke’s message. The husband and wife reared their son with such fidelity to their own traditions that they did everything “required by the law” and thus “the child grew” (2:39-40). The identification of Nazareth as “where he had been brought up” also prepares the reader to understand how

those present in the synagogue could so blithely identify him as “Joseph’s son” (4:22).

This phrase is paralleled by a phrase in verse 17 that begins with the same, somewhat unusual, form for the word *where* and same verbal pattern. That passage (“where it was written”) suggests material composed in the distant past. The parallel provides us reason to believe the phrase here in verse 16 suggests Jesus is returning to his home after some time. A man returning to his hometown for a visit after a significant absence was not any more unusual then than it is now. On the other hand, by setting this event before Jesus embarked on his ministry or called any disciples, Luke focuses on Jesus and his ministry as the central element in this drama.

4:16c

he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.

Luke recorded that Jesus returned to the community of his childhood at the very beginning of his ministry, and on the day of worship joined in the assembly of those who likely watched and shared in his growth. Jesus appeared at the synagogue, the institution that functioned as the heart of the community.

Jesus’ world was radically different than ours. In his world, important realities such as respect, prestige, power and even identity did not result so much from individual effort and achievement. Instead, one’s community defined, awarded and regulated them. A traditional agrarian society with most people living in villages and small towns permitted no clear distinctions between religious, economic and social issues. Jesus returned home and sought a hearing from those who had known him the longest. In this context,

that setting could be either safe or dangerous depending on one's standing in that community.

The term *synagogue* is derived from a Greek word that means "bring" or "lead together." The term is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) as a designation for the entire gathering of Israel. It came to specify the assembly of local groups of Jews gathered both for worship and for social needs of the community. By metonymy, it eventually served as the designation for the structure in which local congregations of Jews participated in their religious and social activities.

This shift has hindered an adequate understanding of the nature of the institution because interpreters become so preoccupied with the building they disregard important elements of the institution. Before synagogues became a particular kind of structure, they were primarily religious gatherings of like-minded Jews. Horsley concludes that there is no evidence of synagogue buildings in Galilee until the third century C.E.²

Assemblies of Jews began to emerge during and after the exile began in 587/6 B.C.E. In particular, the Jews in Mesopotamia faced the need of reorganizing their religious existence in light of the destruction of the temple and their separation from the homeland. Perhaps they began gathering at various locations in small groups on the sabbath to pray and read the sacred writings. This very functional kind of community structure was not dependent on being housed in a special building. It is important to keep in mind the degree of influence and power wielded by these local religious assemblies and that Jesus found it important to participate in such gatherings.

Just as the synagogue provided the context for much of the worship of Jesus during his childhood and young adulthood, according to this account it now provided the context for the inauguration of his ministry. It also became the setting for miracles, teaching and moments of conflict. Thus, it deserves our careful attention.

Luke chapter 4 is our oldest account of a synagogue service. Luke is focused on portraying Jesus as the central figure of his narrative and he does not recount the entire service. Our other evidence does not clarify exactly what would occur in such a service in the synagogues of Galilee in the first century C.E. The primary elements included the following:

- public confession of the Shema (so named because it represents the first Hebrew word of Deut. 6:4-9 from which it is drawn);
- praying of certain set prayers;
- reading sacred scripture;
- reading a passage of the Torah (first read in Hebrew, then translated into Aramaic. Evidence indicates these readings were prescribed in a multi-year lectionary.);
- reading a passage of the Psalms;
- reading a passage of the Prophets (These readings do not appear to have been prescribed until later. This is apparently the point at which Jesus participated.);
- sermon or exposition of the text;
- blessing.

4:16d

He stood up to read,

Jesus follows the usual pattern of standing to read and sitting to teach. In 5:3, Jesus is depicted as sitting for the purpose of instructing the disciples.

4:17a

and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

Scroll is an accurate rendering here given the historical setting. The practice of creating written materials in book form (codex) developed considerably later. The materials found at Qumran near the Dead Sea verify that the text of Isaiah could be recorded on a single scroll. As synagogues matured, various leadership roles emerged. One of those was an attendant (*hazzan*) charged with obtaining and caring for the scrolls on which the scriptures were inscribed.

4:17b

He unrolled the scroll

This would be the proper way to find one's place in a parchment scroll. Some Greek manuscripts have an entirely different word that means "open" that probably resulted from a later copyist understanding the word *biblios* (scroll) to refer to a book rather than a scroll.

4:17c

and found the place where it was written:

Luke's use of the term *found* is especially significant because it suggests an element of purpose on the part of Jesus with regard to the text he read. Luke's choice of this word fits very well with his depiction of Jesus who is, in every way, the central figure and in control in this drama.

Evidence is lacking that the readings from the prophets were prescribed at this time, so the view that this text was

required is not persuasive. The idea that Jesus had the Isaiah text in mind and consciously with intention sought it out gives meaning to his return to Nazareth and the synagogue. It is unlikely this was the first time he found the text he was about to read. Perhaps in a way the text also found him and in a manner of speaking called his name. It is interesting that the perfect tense of the Greek word translated "found" became the basis for the English word *eureka* (I have found it!).

Summary

Jesus returned to be with a group in which he customarily worshipped set in a familiar community to deliver the message that set forth his vision of God's work.

From our highly individualized Baptist perspectives, it is nearly impossible to grasp the immensity of this moment. In a world where honor, respect and power to a large degree depended on maintaining one's standing within the community, Jesus was about to present himself in a manner that challenged its deepest beliefs. In a world where it was bad to break faith with one's community and question its structures, Jesus would be perceived as doing exactly that.

Even so, challenge us Lord Jesus!

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¹Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 107-112.

²Ibid, 132.

Luke 4:18

Introduction

I gather my thoughts for writing this commentary just a day after listening to Antjie Krog lecture at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa. The group I have been leading attended the lecture because we had been reading Krog's book *Country of My Skull*.¹ This book serves as a captivating report on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, after nearly 40 years of apartheid, attempted to administer justice and lay aside lingering demands for retribution.

Krog described a kind of justice that focuses upon restoration instead of retribution. Rather than try to measure what has been lost and repay that loss in kind, one seeks restoration of each individual's humanity to begin the justice process. From there, true justice and reconciliation may be found between involved parties.

As the lecture moved into question-and-answer time, Krog looked at our group of American students and asked us how America's response to 9/11 is similar to the challenges South Africa faced post-apartheid. There was agonizing conversation until, after reminding us of the immense intellectual, creative and economic wealth of America, she asked the most profound and difficult question of all: "Why is the USA now a country that embodies the loss of moral imagination?"

This is a difficult question to receive from a person in another country. The answer to that question surely is incredibly complex, and there may be serious debate concerning whether or not America has lost its moral imagination. However, when this question reverberates off

of the words of Jesus in Luke 4:18, there is serious cause for concern.

Moral response demands significant and timely action. The poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed require action and social change. The key becomes the restoration of humanity for each individual. However one may judge the loss of moral imagination in America, it is certainly true that the words of Jesus challenge us to act more boldly and live more imaginatively in a culture of moral ambiguity and compromise.

Commentary

4:18a

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me"

Luke 4:18 signals the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After the baptism and temptation narratives, the reader learns that Jesus returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and begins teaching in synagogues to great praise (Lk 4:14-15). What happens next ties Jesus' ministry to his baptism and to the words of the prophets while simultaneously announcing the shape and focus of his ministry. Luke 4:18 challenges the moral imagination, and careful consideration of key terms in Jesus' proclamation point the way to creative thought and action.

A key phrase for initial consideration is "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me" (v 18). This phrase identifies the ministry of Jesus as distinct from his temptations. The source of his work will be an anointing that springs from his baptism and his unique relationship with God.²

Not only does his authority derive from the Spirit, but this authority finds unique expression through the words of the prophet Isaiah. When Jesus reads from the Isaiah 61 passage, he utilizes language often associated with the proclamation of the year of Jubilee (Isa 61:2). Alan Culpepper writes that it is most likely that Jesus connects “the year of the Lord’s favor” with the coming of the kingdom of God that will result in the ideals of the Jubilee year finding fulfillment in his ministry (cf. Lk 4:43).³

4:18b

to bring good news to the poor.

Jesus’ choice of biblical text acts as a declaration of purpose for his ministry. The term *good news* first appears in Luke associated with angelic announcements of the birth of Jesus (1:19; 2:10). From then on, it is used to describe the content of Jesus’ ministry. The day after the synagogue scene, Jesus uses “good news” to summarize the intent of his ministry: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God” (4:43). In three other places in Luke, “good news” summarizes Jesus’ ministry (8:1; 9:6; 20:1).

This is a very unique proclamation that finds definition in the life and ministry of Jesus. It is “good news” that radically changes the world. All who hear this good news hear everything in life differently from that moment on.

This “good news” finds its particular expression in the word it brings to the poor. Jesus says he will “bring good news to the poor.” This focus on the poor appears ten more times in Luke. In each case, the text calls attention to Jesus’ ministry to the poor. The poor are blessed (6:20). The poor are the subject of the good news (7:22). They are invited to the banquet when other guests do not appear (14:13; 14:21). The poor such as Lazarus receive special attention and

favor (16:20, 22). Jesus challenges the rich man to give away his wealth to the poor to demonstrate faithfulness (18:22). Zacchaeus’ immediate response to Jesus is to give his money to the poor (19:8). The poor widow’s offering in the Temple receives Jesus’ notice as an exemplary gift (21:2-3).

The term for poor (*ptochos*) refers to those who are abjectly poor or utterly destitute. The most common term for poor in the Hebrew Bible (*‘ani*) carries with it the notion of economically poor, but it also suggests the idea of oppression, exploitation and suffering.⁴ It is insufficient, though, to imagine that we can take words such as these, break them down and then understand the clear meaning of Jesus’ proclamation in the synagogue. When individuals live in poverty, their lives are influenced by a host of political, cultural and economic relationships. Poverty and wealth are always about such relationships, and Jesus announces that he will bring a new relationship to the poor.

Poverty does not solely reflect a lack of resources. Rather, it reflects the inability to make choices with one’s life and for one’s family. Poverty always reflects the power and domination systems that people have upon other individuals, a kind of power and domination that removes life choices. When Jesus stands before the synagogue and announces he will bring good news to the poor, he is effectively saying that he will give them the opportunity to make choices with their lives. The lives they live will now have the option of relationship and participation in the kingdom of God.

This proclamation has enormous potential power. The marginalized move into the center of relationship with God. The silenced receive the voice of prayer. The ignored have God’s attention. The good news should proclaim to people that they now have a choice with their lives.

We must think more imaginatively than just developing some sort of analogy between poverty and one's spiritual, emotional, physical or economic state of being. How may we truly speak of choice for people? When someone is impoverished, he or she needs choices more than anything else.

Moreover, when we consider the likelihood that Luke's attention to poverty is a response to a relatively poor early church facing an influx of wealthy members who bring into the community affluence and power, the contemporary church must honestly assess its attention to the poor.⁵ How does the contemporary church hear a Gospel written to the poor who are denied choice, when it has an abundance of choices? How does the church accept the mantle of these words of Jesus and work imaginatively to introduce choice to people who have no choice? Beyond considering the meaning of the words related to poverty, the contemporary church must envision a significant way to act that empowers the poor with choice.

Having seen the townships of Cape Town where tens of thousands live in tacked-together shacks, and recognizing that poverty is not limited to South Africa but finds its uneasy home even in America, we must accept that people need more than Jesus. They need the hope for choice that Jesus brings with his message of the kingdom of God. This requires intentionally embracing the needs of the poor and looking for every means possible to engage them at the source of their poverty, whether it is political, cultural or economic, and to be a part of a solution to offer them choices in their lives.

The poor need Jesus. The poor also need jobs and food. The poor need healthcare and dignity. The poor need education and hope. All these things rightly come in the

kingdom of God. Solutions are as varied as that which the creative power of God at work in the minds of people can produce. Anything is possible.

4:18c

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

When choice becomes the lens used to view poverty, then the second element of Jesus' proclamation becomes even more powerful. Jesus says, "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives." The word for captives (*aichmalotoi*) is unique in the New Testament, but the work of Jesus easily demonstrates the various ways he released people from their captivity (illness, possession, prejudice or economic depravity).

It is interesting that Luke otherwise only uses the word for release (*aphesis*) to mean "forgiveness of sins."⁶ The word has the connotation of deliverance, liberty, remission, as well as forgiveness. Forgiveness is a wonderful word that suggests a forgetting of all past wrongs, but not all captives need forgiveness. Deliverance and liberty are the heart's desire for all captives justly or unjustly held. The good news challenges followers of Jesus Christ to release captives wherever they are bound.

The importance of Jesus' proclamation becomes clear as new words move into common vocabulary. Words like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo join Holocaust and Death Row and a family of other words that remind us that not all prisoners are justly held. In some cases, if one wants to argue for the appropriateness of captivity, one must at least wonder if the captives have been treated justly. Every person deserves justice.

Jesus delivered people from their illnesses, from demonic possession, from racial and social prejudice and from economic enslavement. This activity of Jesus envisions a world where captives are free to experience liberty and forgiveness. His proclamation pulls the church into a future that looks more and more like the kingdom of God.

As Baptists move into a new covenant, it may be time to be honest about the kinds of things that have held us captive. There is liberty in renouncing control, deliverance in releasing power, remission in forgiving one's accusers and forgiveness in admitting guilt. Jesus' proclamation reminds us to examine our lives for all the ways control, power, accusation and guilt hold us captive. Baptists must honestly ask what holds us captive and to what extent will release from that captivity prepare us for more exciting and powerful service.

4:18d

and recovery of sight to the blind,

The call for Jesus to bring "sight to the blind" points to his healing of the blind, but it also reminds us of the coming of God's kingdom. Isaiah 35:1-10 envisions a time of fulfillment for God's people. It speaks of the land erupting in bloom upon the return of its people and the weak of hand and knee being made strong for the journey. In verse 5, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened," prefigures the blind recovering their sight in the kingdom of God.

This understanding indicates the need for the church to embrace this proclamation for itself. While there are not many who may go around and heal those who are literally blind, the church may act in such a way as to be a light for others to see the work of the kingdom of God in Jesus. Jesus demonstrated that the kingdom comes in unforeseen

ways by proclaiming the kingdom in unexpected places and in uncommon ways to all people. While the church's routines, programs and traditions may have worked effectively in the past, unless the church finds itself overwhelmed with the actual or the spiritually blind, then perhaps it is time to imagine anew what ministry should look like and entertain the possibility of significant change.

4:18e

to let the oppressed go free,

Finally, Jesus proclaims that his purpose is "to let the oppressed go free." Oppression and poverty seldom are far apart in experience. Jesus draws upon a rich biblical tradition of God siding with the oppressed. "The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed" (Ps 9:9) and one "who executes justice for the oppressed" (Ps 146:7). More exactly, the people of God knew oppression themselves when they were captives in Egypt. God's ultimate deliverance became the central story for God's chosen people. The Hebrews were reminded of their need to welcome aliens and strangers because all those who are oppressed need assistance. Exodus 23:9 says, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the Land of Egypt."

The Hebrew word for oppression (*'ana*) bears close affinity with the word for poor. This word never has some inanimate object as its subject; rather it always refers to persons.⁷ Oppression does not reflect a static state of being, but an experience lived out by people. Oppression means not being able to decide the path of one's life.

Summary

As stifling as oppression is, the memory of oppression liberates. The Hebrew scriptures reverberate with the echoes of God liberating the Hebrews from Egyptian oppression. Perhaps Baptists have forgotten what it means to be oppressed and, in this, have lost an important part of the good news. For if we have forgotten the taste of oppression, how can we savor the freedom it offers? For too long Baptists have not been alien people, and in our settled nature, we have forgotten our heritage of men and women who were oppressed for their varying views.

The good news is imaginative. In its very nature, it imagines a new reality like unto the kingdom of God. As Jesus stands before the synagogue to announce the beginning of his ministry, few could imagine what would happen next. The categories were familiar—poor, captives, blind, oppressed—but they hardly could imagine how Jesus would begin to offer choices to the poor, set captives loose from all sorts of chains, give sight to the blind that they might see the kingdom of God and free oppressed of every weight.

By leading forward in this vision, Jesus calls believers to follow his moral path. This text challenges believers to live lives unbounded by constraint of any form and instead to live anointed and inspired by the Spirit. A moral imagination demands creativity and vision. Jesus sets out before those who follow him choices for wonderfully imaginative lives, lives that could not and would not be lived without the power of the good news and the kingdom of God.

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¹Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

²R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," Vol. IX, in the *New Interpreter's Commentary of the Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 105.

³Culpepper, 106.

⁴J. David Pleins, "Oppressed," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 408-410.

⁵Thomas D. Hanks, "Oppressed in New Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 417.

⁶Culpepper, 105.

⁷Pleins, 410.

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Luke 4:19

Introduction

One might think it odd to begin a commentary celebrating new Baptist beginnings with a quote from a Catholic. Yet Pope John Paul II said something quite remarkable in *Centesimus Annus*, the papal encyclical he issued in 1991. His comment concerns the church's attitudes toward economic systems in general, and capitalism specifically. He said, "The church has no [economic] models to present...[it] recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but at the same time points out that those need to be oriented toward the common good."

While the Pope's teaching directs a strong word of admonishment to American theologies—the "gospel of success," Pat Robertson's evangelicalism and some public theologies—about their commitments to the free market, it perhaps draws conclusions uncharacteristic of the kerygmatic vision of the Gospels. A central question we must ask is, Does Jesus in fact say nothing about what form our economic relations should take as we are his church to the world? While it would be nonsense to locate any type of economic theory in Jesus' thought, does Jesus' new community have nothing to say about economic practices except for general, principled reminders of God's love?

This commentary believes the answer to this question might be found in Luke 4:19, Jesus' "Nazareth Manifesto," which records Jesus as quoting the prophet Isaiah, saying (beginning with v 18): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (*keryxai eniauton kyriou dektion*)."

Several questions that might aid in answering our central question above emerge from this story itself. Why does Jesus quote Isaiah? What is the year of Jubilee of Isaiah and Leviticus? In what sense does Jesus invoke the Jubilee as it relates to his mission? How does the narrative of Luke clarify Jesus' use of the Jubilee?

Once the text has been analyzed and guided by these questions, we will ask: What is the significance of the Jubilee for contemporary Christians? Does Jesus have in mind a specific model for God's acceptable economy?

Commentary

4:19

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Modern biblical scholarship agrees that the "year of the Lord's favor" (*eniauton kyriou dektion*) proclaimed by Jesus in Luke 4 refers to the year of Jubilee commanded by God to Moses in Leviticus 25. Jesus' reliance on Isaiah confirms this conclusion.

When Isaiah uses Jubilee imagery in chapters 58 and 61, he does so within the context of reestablishing the covenant with those who are "in Jacob" and who turn from transgression (59:20-21). Isaiah's general theme is restoration, and it appears that Jesus envisions the same end. A strong argument for the commonality of their Jubilee messages is found in the use of forms of the Greek verb *apheimi*—meaning to remit, send away, liberate, forgive a debt, restore. The word is found in Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 (as well as Matt 6, the Lord's Prayer). It is a definitive term for the essence of Jubilee.

It seems that Jesus understands his mission to be one of restoration through liberation from oppression, remittance of burdens through love and the forgiveness of sins. His is a messianic message in comparison with Isaiah's prophecy. The difference in the two lies in the relationship between the speaker and the agent of restoration: Only Jesus, not Isaiah, fulfills the restoration.

Other themes in the Isaiah passage give clarity to Jesus' statements about his mission. Isaiah 58-61 is considered part of Second Isaiah (or Third, actually), written before Babylon was destroyed by Persia in the 6th century B.C.E. and in anticipation of a new age for Israel possible with this event. The first 39 chapters emerged during Isaiah's period of prophesying in the 8th century, a time when the Northern Kingdom was being annexed by the Assyrian empire. Watching these events unfold, Isaiah exhorts Judah to social justice and admonishes its nationalistic designs.

Chapters 58-61, coming nearly 200 years after—and from the mouth of a later prophetic voice—address the Lord's faithfulness to those exiles who abide despite recent exilic experiences of suffering. The theme of the restored community of God found in these chapters builds upon 49:8 where the Lord reveals his faithfulness, saying, "In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you." In this famously poetic section, Isaiah integrates the day of the Lord's favor with salvation (49:8) and with righteous, just and obedient living (58, 61).

This combination of meanings—restoration, salvation and justice—should not be overlooked as we consider the significance of the year of Jubilee to Isaiah and Jesus. Nor should social justice and righteousness be dismissed on the way to understanding the nature of Jubilee itself. In Isaiah 58, 61 and Luke 4, the favorable year of the Lord is

predicated by actions of justice. This proviso is not new with Isaiah, but comes from the mouth of Moses.

What is the year of Jubilee of Isaiah and Leviticus?

The Jubilee year commands originate most fully when God speaks to Moses on Sinai. They are a set of positive and negative commands that prepare Israel to enter the land of Canaan. Consequently, this set of commands centers on the just treatment of the land befitting God's people and for God's people. At the heart of these commands lies the sabbatical year. Every seven years, says the Lord, the sabbath laws found in Exodus were now to apply in Canaan. The land is to lie fallow to give it rest, and to allow the poor to eat (Ex 23:10).

Subsequently, every seven cycles of Sabbath years there will occur a Jubilee year, in Hebrew *yobel*, customarily occurring every 50th year. Sharon Ringe explains that "every fifty years Israel was to declare a year of liberty marked by four types of release."¹ In Leviticus we read that the types of release constituted meaningful social and economic practices consisting of:

- the land lying fallow for one year (25:11-12);
- cancellation of debts (25:31, 40-41, 54);
- freedom for any Israelite who had become an indentured servant (25:40-41) and
- the return of ancestral lands sold out of financial necessity to those whom God had originally given them (25:27-28).

Christopher J. Wright in *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* describes the Jubilee year as economic institution with two main points of concern: the family and the land. It was grounded in social and theological assump-

tions. Socially, the Jubilee provided economic protection for the smallest of Israel's three kinship arrangements, the household. By protecting the household's land grant, the clan and tribe were further secured in the covenant. Theologically, because the land in Canaan was given to the Israelite tribes by God in a system of equal distribution and inalienability, the periodic return of family land reminded Israel that the land was God's, and humans had no right to it in perpetuity (25:23). It preserved the Hebrew memory of exodus redemption, covenant relationship and security, divine prerogative for judgment and the hope of restoration in loss.

Although God set forth a social blueprint in Leviticus for the community's faithfulness, scholars are divided on whether the Jubilee prescriptions were really intended to be concrete social practices. Many dissent from the view taken by Wright, who maintains the Jubilee functions both as a future hope and also as an ethical demand in the present. Their arguments rest with the inability of modern research to show a time when the Jubilee of Leviticus was actually practiced.

Working from its use in Isaiah, others believe the Jubilee to be analogical representation of God's spiritual plan. Ringe is one of those who fall into the later camp. She says, "the imagery of the Jubilee—of a royal decree of amnesty, of rest, and of liberty—is found in Isaiah 61 linked not to recurring human political and economic activity, but to the inaugural celebration of God's reign." She understands the Jubilee to represent a shift in attitudes and allegiances, a kind of trope for renewing a just society not to be taken literally.

In what sense does Jesus invoke the Jubilee as it relates to his mission?

Darrell Bock agrees with the assessment that we should not read Isaiah 61 as a literal social mandate, noting the comprehensive nature of the deliverance linked to Jubilee by Isaiah. Jubilee has been interpreted in Judaism as a reference to the dawn of God's new age, he comments. According to Bock, the implications of this position for the Luke 4 citation are significant. He says:

"The citation in Luke, then, is not a call to fulfill literally the legal requirement of Jubilee. Rather, the passage takes that picture of freedom to show what God is doing spiritually and physically through his commissioned agent, Jesus. Jubilee, by analogy, becomes a picture of total forgiveness and salvation, just as it was in its prophetic usage."²

For Bock, Jesus fulfills God's age and will do what Israel was rebuked in Isaiah 58 for not doing: Jesus will meet in love the needs of those who need God. The year of the Lord's favor in Luke, then, parallels Isaiah 61 only in so far as the consequences for those who are oppressed match. The Jubilee is Jesus' work, not the community's, he concludes.

John Howard Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus* takes a different view of the Jubilee, however. He believes that, for the listeners of Jesus, the phrase mostly likely meant the Jubilee year, "the time when the inequities accumulated through the years are to be crossed off and all God's people will begin again at the same point."³ It had tangible social and economic consequences because it draws the liberation theme of the exodus in Leviticus, as well as the restoration theme in Isaiah. It was a time of restoration not only for the oppressed, but also for the social and economic practices of the community. For Yoder, the Jubilee year inaugurated by Jesus describes not only what God does, or Jesus does, but also as to who and how the new community of God will be. The new community of Christ followers will do

what Israel was rebuked in Isaiah 58 for not doing: restore justice to those who had been oppressed by economic and social practices that allowed some to accumulate much while denying others that chance.

How does the narrative of Luke clarify Jesus' use of the Jubilee?

Quite early in the narrative, the author of Luke-Acts directly declares Jesus to be the fulfillment of the covenant and does so by way of the prophet. Writing to a congregation composed of Jews, Gentiles, rich and poor, Luke understands the prophetic tradition to be both continuing and culminating in Jesus. Luke's Jesus, then, stages his inaugural address in the synagogue at Nazareth by quoting Isaiah. We should take care, however, not to read Jesus' Isaiah quotation as simply a scripted event in a plot invented by the writer of Luke. Luke is the self-described recorder of Jesus' actions (1:3), not the author of them. The impetus for the Isaiah reading lies with Jesus, although many have suggested that this reading fell in sequence of lectionary-type readings. This theory, however, has been difficult to substantiate. Nevertheless, whether Jesus selected the passage or not does not diminish its hermeneutical significance for the Christian community.

How does Luke's prophetic emphasis guide the story he's telling?

A literary approach to this passage might suggest three hermeneutical issues at work: who are the hearers, what is the meaning, how does it work. These issues follow the prophetic pattern of charge, call and response.

First, the Gospel writer views his audience as an extension of Isaiah's audience, and understands, along with Jesus, the Nazareth crowd to be an extension as well.

This is no cheap historical move, but it is one pregnant with social, theological and eschatological meaning. The unfaithfulness of Judah condemned by Isaiah in 6th century Judah, as well as its conditional redemption, is theological-ly, socially and historically brought forward in verses 18-19. Luke deposits this memory in the memory of his audience just as Jesus dropped it into the synagogue. Drawing upon James McClendon's strategy for reading scripture, the "this is that," or "what was, is now" audience link implicit in this passage seems to be a prominent indication of the passage's meaning.⁴

Salvation, restoration and justice apply to all audiences through this reading strategy. We, too, are implicated in the passage. The contemporary church is, by way of scripture, the Lukan synagogue and its extension, the Acts church. The meaning of Isaiah's words to 6th century Judah have literal, not merely analogical, application for the Nazareth crowd, for Luke's audience, and for us.

Second, and related to the first issue, because the synagogue was the site of the ritualistic reading of the Jewish law and the writings, the Nazareth crowd that day would have surely understood the meaning of Jesus' prophetic source. Those few verses from Isaiah 61 would have pointed the congregational memory to the whole of Isaiah. They would have recalled God's mandate of righteousness to the people located in the general theme of servanthood.

Jesus' scriptural reference would have reminded them of the consequences of trusting "nations over God" found in Isaiah 1-39. They would have remembered that the right fast is not one shaped by their own self-interest, but by actions of justice (58). They would have hung on every word of God's promises of restoration to Israel as God's holy people (Ex 19:6) found in Isaiah 40-66. They would have

been reminded of what God's community would look like if they would trust and obey the ordinances of their God (Isa 59:20). They might mourn Judah's mistrust of the Lord as traitorous, one who allowed Assyria to overtake Israel.

Yet, at the same time, Luke provides comfort through the ultimate one to be trusted: Jesus. Consequently, as John Oswalt observes, they would be reminded of real character of the people of God "when they experience the deliverance that the arm of the Lord procures for them."⁵ Comfort they did not receive, however. The Nazareth crowd heard only the indictment and was enraged.

From whence did their rage arise? Might it have something to do with Jesus' implicit condemnation of his own people through the Isaiah quote, as well as his suggestion that non-Jews might be more worthy as God's people than they? Moreover, what is the substance of this condemnation? This brings us to our third hermeneutical issue: purpose. Just as Isaiah laid out the prescriptions for Israel's restoration as God's righteous people, Jesus too lays out the prescriptions for God's new community. He reveals that which needs to be restored and how it is to be restored.

The theological and material implications of Jesus' words are clear. Isaiah's voice spoken through Jesus charges the Nazareth crowd—and all Israel—with unfaithfulness. They are not living as God's Jubilee people. But just as the young man in Luke 18 walks away sadly because he realizes that faithful righteousness and one's social life are integrally connected, they lash out in rage because Jesus has connected, just as Isaiah did with his crowd, their righteousness with a particular social, cultural and economic way of being a people. The response to God's consistent call seems to culminate in what Isaiah, Jesus and Luke view as obeying God's ordinances, serving God's justice

and being restored to God's righteous people. That culmination can be found in Jesus' punctuated ending, "the year of the Lord's favor."

What is the significance of the Jubilee for the church today?

When Jesus confronts our injustices, we more often than not deny his claims. We frequently fail to see his point because we assume the way we live with one another to be verified, justified and validated by our faith. Our vision of God's beloved community—what Jesus referred to as the kingdom of God—extends no further than our own assumptions. We are able, then, to generalize the biblical witness to be a set of principles that have literal application to our lives only in so far as they validate our social norms. This kind of vision, however, is itself a product of our estrangement from Jesus in our moral lives. Lee Camp in *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* calls this kind of vision a disease—one produced by rose-colored cataracts. These cataracts have been formed by our unhealthy allegiances to political and economic stories that ignore God's commands for community.

Just as the Nazareth crowd failed to see their disease, instead finding Jesus to be ill (Lk 4:23), the church today refuses to admit its "cataracts." Could it be, then, that the church is called to embody an alternative economy, founded on the Jubilee prescriptions in Leviticus 25? Could it be that the fruits worthy of repentance called for by John the Baptist in Luke 3:8 are those of Jubilee relationships?

Summary

The difficult task of locating Moses' Israel, Isaiah's Judah, and Jesus' synagogue in the contemporary church is

revealed by the very different world in which we live. Because our social structures are vastly different from those of the biblical world, any direct application of the “four releases” of Jubilee seems implausible.

However, if our first step is to view Jesus’ Jubilee proclamation as a real picture of the way the church should be, rather than a typology or analogy, then perhaps American Christians, led by a new Baptist vision, can begin to live a Jubilee economy. Of course, this might mean confronting entrenched economic structures that create social divisions, like capital accumulation, lending practices, healthcare, educational opportunities and political designs. Maybe it means beginning with the recognition that we have lost any notion of sabbath justice to the morality of the market.

If we approach our blindness repentantly, however, perhaps we can produce these worthy fruits.

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¹ Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 68.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 410.

³ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 36.

⁴ James McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 33.

⁵ John Oswalt, “The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66 in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

⁶ Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 42.

Luke 4:20-22

Introduction

In a series of commercials, a wireless network company features a man walking through various parks, on the street, on top of a mountain and even in an athletic stadium. All the while, he is talking on a cell phone, and wherever he goes, he constantly asks, “Can you hear me now?” The idea is to show that there is no limit to this company’s wireless service. Its reach is quite expansive. No matter where a subscriber goes, the company’s service is there. Anyone using its services can be heard anywhere at any time.

Whereas this company’s marketing team is more concerned with connecting audiology and technology, Jesus in this Lukan text is more concerned with the relationship between spirituality and audiology—how does what one hears translate into what one believes and subsequently into what one does?

The crowd listens to Jesus and expects him to give his customary commentary on this sabbath. Yet with all eyes fixed on him, Jesus does not give any detailed excursus, just a simple one-liner on fulfillment. The crowd hears this, but what are they to do with it? Because what the crowd expected and what Jesus delivered did not match, his speaking and their ability to hear did not connect.

The question behind the question, “Can you hear me now?” is “What prevents God’s people from really hearing God’s voice?” Perhaps like those in the synagogue in Nazareth who longed for Jesus to deliver some anti-Roman, pro-Israel restoration sermon, people of today often do not hear

God speak, because what we long for is sometimes not what God renders. Our expectations and God's deliverables do not correlate, thus creating a cognitive and spiritual disconnect.

Yet as believers we must keep in mind that God has always done the unexpected. A baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, raised in the slums of Nazareth and crucified like a criminal was not the Messiah those in Jesus' day expected. Expectations can indeed hinder what we choose to hear.

Commentary

4:20

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Luke makes it clear that Jesus is a practicing Jew who does not neglect synagogue fellowship. Verse 15 and now verse 20 affirm his familiarity with synagogue custom. *Synagogue* (*sunagoges*) means "a leading together, assembling; congregation of persons." It is different from *church*, or *ekklesia*, in that synagogue is fellowship/gathering of Jews.

Whereas there are differing opinions on the origin of these gatherings, most scholars maintain that synagogues developed after the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century B.C.E. Due to the destruction of the Temple, Jews needed a place to gather. Thus these smaller assemblies or synagogues of Diaspora Jews occurred. The order of exercises in such gatherings included prayers, reading of the Hebrew scriptures with primacy to the Pentateuch, commentary on scripture, an ending prayer and benediction.

After Jesus read the Isaiah text that proclaims release, sight and freedom to all who are in physical and social bondage, he handed the scroll to the synagogue attendant and sat down. *Attendant* (*huperetes*, or *chazzan* in Hebrew) refers to an assistant or servant, a subordinate official who waits to accomplish commands of his superior (used also in Lk 1:2 as "associate").

What Jesus does is not unusual. Scrolls were made of leather and kept in special places in the synagogue. Assistants took the responsibility of helping the synagogue leader during any gathering and such included the care of the scroll. Perhaps the scroll's fragile nature and the need to preserve it warranted this degree of delicacy.

Another customary act as shown in this verse is that Jesus sits down after reading from the scroll. Whereas he stands up to read (v 16), he sits to make commentary or offer a sermon on the text. This sitting is the position of learning and teaching. In some ways it puts the teacher on same level as the students. Luke records Jesus engaging in this same pedagogical act in 5:3 where he teaches the crowd, not in a synagogue, but from a boat. Sitting allows for more casual conversation and serves as a means of relaxing speaker and hearer. Such creates a type of dialogue or exchange in which all involved become both student and teacher. (See also Lk 14:28, 16:6.)

Although Jesus is sitting among the people in the synagogue, all eyes are fixed on him. *He* is to lead this teaching moment. There is an expectation that he is about to teach something profound. There is an expectation that he is about to reveal truth that will change the lives of the people of Israel. As he has just read from Isaiah's messianic prophecy, the people expect Jesus to offer something about the Messiah who is to come redeem Israel, restore

her glory and release her from Roman rule. Yet, remember God often does the unexpected.

While he introduces Jesus and his ministry at the synagogue in Nazareth, Luke nonetheless mentions other synagogues in Capernaum (4:31) and in Judea (4:44) as a way of showing their prevalence during Jesus' time. Ironically, the gospel writer paints a negative portrait of synagogues in that controversy surrounds the man with a withered hand who is healed in a synagogue on the sabbath (6:6-10). Such similar unrest characterizes Jesus' encounter with a bent-over woman whom he also heals on the sabbath in a synagogue (13:10-17). In addition the author suggests that religious trials occurred at these gathering places and its leaders are deemed as opponents of Jesus (12:11). Thus Jesus' near-death experience at the hands of synagogue attendees in 4:28-30 connects well with Luke's overall pessimistic view of the synagogue, something the reader would not expect. It is ironic that in Luke's day and still today that a place of worship could become a place of spiritual turmoil and political turbulence.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that also speaks to unexpected reactions from religious leaders. Clergymen in Alabama critiqued King because they feared his non-violent actions were unwise, untimely and extreme. Instead of fellow clergy supporting and affirming King's work, they suggested that he should wait. King responded, "when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will... , never quite knowing what to expect next... (and) fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."¹

4:21

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The concept behind prophecy is that at some point what is prophesied will happen. Isaiah's prophecy of liberation and redemption for Israel would happen. Those in attendance at the synagogue in Nazareth knew this. They were not sure when, but they knew it would happen.

According to Luke's Jesus, this deliverance was happening now: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke records Jesus using the word *pleroo*, which means "to perform fully; to be accomplished (declaration or prophecy); to be completed, finished; to have happened (see also Lk 1:20; 21:22; 24:44).

With his presence not just in the synagogue, but with his presence on earth, the time of jubilee was at hand. All of God's people would have good news and be captive no more.

In Jesus, the time lapse from Isaiah's 6th century B.C.E. to the 1st C.E. is being filled or fulfilled. The promise of deliverance is fulfilled in the act of Jesus reading the Isaiah text and in the act of the attendees listening to it. This is why Jesus says, "fulfilled in your hearing." You heard the prophecy in the past, now you hear that it is coming true. You heard the prediction in times of old, now you are hearing that it is here now. You heard about the promised messiah, now hear this from that same Messiah. Your redemption is taking place now, no longer a promise, but an actuality.

This is not the only time Luke employs fulfillment language. Gabriel's conversation with Zechariah (1:20), his narrative

on the destruction of Jerusalem (21:22) and the dialogue on the road to Emmaus (24:44) also speak to predictions coming to bear. Luke is consistent with his semantics. Whereas the meaning is the same, the setting for each pericope is different.

Fulfillment language is also “such a time as this” language. It was this idea of “now is the time” that propelled women such as Virginia Broughton of Tennessee, Nannie Helen Burroughs of Washington, D.C. and Sarah Willie Layten of Pennsylvania to push black Baptist women’s work to the forefront. Only five years after the founding of the National Baptist Convention in 1895, these women started the Women’s Convention to give voice and attention to gender relations among black Baptists.² In light of all of the fund-raising, administrative support and domestic work women had contributed to this larger body, the time had now come for women to participate in self-governance for self-fulfillment and communal uplift.

Jewish history foretold of a delivering messiah. Jesus purports that the same prophecy is now come true. It appears that everyone is on the same page. It seems that at least for now, all are in agreement. Jesus has spoken, and those in the audience have heard. However, time will tell that what he said and what they heard were on two different frequencies.

Was Jesus talking about a conquering messiah? A warrior redeemer? Would his messiah take over the Roman government? Did the hearers desire a messiah on a donkey? A messiah among the poor and marginalized? A crucified savior? They *heard* him, but they did not really *hear* him.

4:22

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Luke maintains that after Jesus reads scripture, sits down to teach and positions himself as scripture fulfilled, those in attendance at the synagogue respond to him favorably. Jesus “spoke well” (*marturo*), which means “to testify strongly; bear honorable testimony; to applaud, speak well of; to have good witness.” It is the same word for *witness* or *bear witness*.

As in verse 15, the hometown crowd affirms Jesus and what he says. The people are proud that “their son, their boy” has grown into a mature young man. What townspeople are not delighted to see a progeny who has gone off to school or away from home only to return polished and well-spoken?

It is as dynamic African American leader W. E. B. Du Bois records in the chapter, “The Coming of John,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here Du Bois describes the journey home of two Johns, one black, the other white. Both men go away to school, and both return to the same hometown. However, the white John flourishes and the black John becomes disillusioned due to racism.³

The testimony is so strong about Jesus that his own are amazed at his gracious speech. Their reaction carries with it the idea of wonder, marvel, admiration and astonishment (see also Lk 2:33, 9:43). Jesus’ speech is gracious in that there is no talk of revenge or retaliation for Roman imperialism. The passage Jesus quotes from Isaiah does not ring of any violence or war. It is also gracious in that restitution in the form of recovery and release belongs to all of God’s

children who are poor, blind, oppressed and captive. As Luke's universal message is subsequently a Gentile message, the messiah has come for both Jew and non-Jew.

There is astonishment not only with what Jesus says, but also in his manner of speech. The people wonder if this could even be Joseph's son. After all, Jesus was born in a lowly state to unmarried parents. It seems unlikely someone from this background could speak so intensely.

In light of his own poor conditions as Joseph's son, Luke portrays it as questionable that Jesus would address God's mercy and favor to all. Matthew (13:54-58) and Mark (6:1-6) also record a similar type of rejection at Nazareth. In each pericope, as in Luke, the people are amazed at how a person of Jesus' background could speak so well. However, for Luke the rejection comes sooner and with the threat of physical violence and death (4:28-30).

From a literary stance, this ambivalence towards Joseph in the gospel of Luke is constant. Joseph does not even speak in the Lukan text. There is birth announcement conversation between Mary and Gabriel (1:26-38). Mary, not Joseph, chastises Jesus when he is missing after the presentation in the Temple (2:41-51). For Luke's audience this would seem to be a gender role reversal in that Mary speaks in the midst of Joseph's silence. Furthermore, while the author establishes Jesus' lineage through Joseph and the house of David (2:4; 3:24-38), this heritage is downplayed in the response of the synagogue crowd at Nazareth.

Was it possible that someone from Joseph's loins could speak so eloquently? What the crowd missed in Jesus was that he came through Joseph, but not from Joseph. Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph, but he was the Son of God

who was with God from the beginning, long before Joseph. Again Luke shows the crowd hearing, but not understanding. They heard his messianic fulfillment proclamation, but the people did not comprehend it. Political expectations about a conquering messiah and now familial expectations regarding pedigree precluded those in the synagogue from receiving the message of Jesus.

Summary

Our expectations and desires often prevent us from truly hearing and receiving the message of Jesus. Because we have prescriptions for how God should act and in what time, we struggle to hear God. Because we place our orders and expect God to fill and fulfill them in our way, we too are not spiritually in tune to the voice of God and God's speaking throughout the world and even in our own lives.

The HIV/AIDS crisis and the genocide in Darfur remind us that we may have expectations as to who gets the AIDS virus or who is at fault in Darfur, yet God does the unexpected by challenging us that the issue is not how God's people get in peril. Our duty is to comfort those who are in danger and moreover get them out of danger.

Spiritual dissonance is what happens when we do not align our wills with God's will for our lives. We say we want the Lord to sit down and teach us. Yet if what God teaches is not the lesson we want for the day, the lesson falls on spiritually deaf ears. Like those in the synagogue that day with Jesus, we may even question God's ancestry, God's pedigree—Is God really God if God does not do what I want, the way in which I want it? However, just as Jesus was born in an unusual manner and died in an even stranger way, we as believers must always be open to God doing

things in abnormal, unexpected ways. We must allow God to be God and hear the Lord through our faithful, believing ears.

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¹Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *A World of Ideas*. 7th Edition. Lee A. Jacobus, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 171-192.

²Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 157.

³Brian Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Martin, Emerson Powery, eds. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

Luke 4:23-24

Introduction

No doubt it has happened to you. You open your email Inbox and begin to read. You cannot believe what you are seeing. Someone you believe and have experienced to be even-tempered and reasonable has sent you an email message and upon reading it, you find your heart beating faster, your mind puzzled by the attack in the words.

If you are mentally disciplined or otherwise distracted at that moment, perhaps you will have time to recognize or remind yourself of the limitations of email, or any written word. Emailing is similar to conversation and so convenient. But emails often written in conversational style create vast chasms of misunderstanding because the tone of voice is not present. The reader/receiver is left to decipher the tone. Is the person angry or joking? Is the choice of words meant to attack or is the person asking questions needing answers? Are the questions rhetorical or in need of immediate and specific response?

No doubt you have encountered some of these same questions as you approach even familiar texts in scripture. The verses receiving focus in this lesson are ripe for misunderstanding or neglect because the absence of clues about the tone in which this collection of sayings is given leaves much room for a variety of interpretations.

Is Jesus picking a fight or responding to accusations the reader doesn't hear? As we work through the larger passage and this particular "hinge" passage, let's keep in mind the danger of assuming we know the tone of voice. As Luke 4 develops, the verses build to an incontrovertible conclu-

sion. And these particular verses give us an important layer of foundation for understanding.

Commentary

4:23-24

²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

As you have been reminded in your commentary reading already, it is important to study the other Synoptic accounts in Mark (6:1-6) and Matthew (13:54-58). In Mark’s and Matthew’s stories of Jesus’ rejection in Nazareth, the hearers ask a series of questions and they ask them in an impersonal tone. Where is he getting this stuff he’s saying? He’s speaking in wisdom forms but what is he saying and where did he get it from? Has he proven himself by doing anything powerful?

And finally they get around to recognition: Don’t we know him? Say, isn’t that Mary’s boy? Don’t our kids go to school with his brothers and sisters? Isn’t he the one who built those bookshelves in the house next door? In Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts, Jesus seems weakened by their doubts and criticisms—unable to do deeds of power other than healing.

It is important to be reminded again that Luke invites us to see these events and words in a new context. Luke appears to have a different goal in mind, and it is so important to him that he doesn’t try to hide the difficulties his narrative presents. His theological intention overrides his need for order or symmetry. Or better said, his order is theologically driven.

Luke 4:23-24

Luke places the event of rejection at Nazareth at the inauguration of Jesus’ teaching/preaching ministry (unlike Matthew and Mark who place the rejection in Nazareth later in the work of Jesus). We can assume a different source than Mark and Matthew or at the very least that Luke’s purposes are served by placing these words of Jesus early in the story and in greater contextual detail.

Before getting to the specifics of verses 23 and 24, let’s summarize what precedes them in Chapter 4:

- Luke makes it clear that Jesus is moving, acting and speaking empowered by the spirit that fills him (vv 1, 14, 18/21).
- Luke makes it clear that Jesus was raised in the Jewish tradition of synagogue worship and scripture study. It is as if Jesus is in the house of Judaism but is trying to clean the windows so his fellow Jews can see what has always been around them—the redeeming work of God in the world.
- Luke makes it clear that Jesus has come, just as he was born, to the *anawim*, the poor, the powerless who trust in God, those who wait for the consolation of Israel. The kingdom of God isn’t about political power but about fulfilling the hopes of the poor and oppressed. It always has been, and the use of the words of the prophet Isaiah makes it clear.
- And finally, Luke is making it clear, even in this chapter, that *now, today, in this very moment*, God is at work in the world.

The fourth chapter of Luke can be neatly divided into two units, verses 1-15 and verses 16-30. Each unit can stand alone or be studied in tandem with the other. In the context

not only of this whole chapter but also his whole Gospel, Luke's choice of order and emphasis raises questions. Even in context, the hinge of verses 23 and 24 stand as now familiar phrases that give a jagged setting for what happens next.

Frequently the chapter is divided at verse 21, giving the impression that the response to Jesus was positive. If the reader stops at 4:21, the reception of Jesus, the hometown boy who has stood up and read from the prophet scroll in his home synagogue, is a positive one. In the context of synagogue worship, one would stand to read from the prophets and then sit to comment or sermonize on what was read.

This division then casts a shadow on verses 22-24. Why does Jesus say these things? Why does he respond in what appears to be a defensive tone? Are we only hearing part of the story, half of the conversation? Is it gaps in conversation that cause the words to appear harsh? A pattern in Luke that may help to illuminate a possibility here is the pattern of listeners thinking or reflecting and Jesus responding. This pattern is visible in Luke 7:39, 49-50; 11:38-39; 19:1-10 and 20: 1-8. In each case Jesus responds sharply, with rebuke, to those who are pondering his actions or words.

Verses 22-24 are the hinge between the reading of the scripture and the sermon that follows. These verses are the pivot of the passage that turns the response from gracious appreciation to murderous rage. The positive response of the first portion isn't the final word. This bridge section, which connects the reading of the good news of Isaiah's promised kingdom to the reality of what God has in store for God's own people, is a pair of sayings with some envy thrown in the middle. But beware, if the reader keeps reading past the initial positive response of verses 21 and

22, he or she runs the risk of being confronted and disturbed just as Jesus' initial hearers were.

Verses 23 and 24 are the first of a handful of places where Luke makes clear that familiarity with the rituals and places of God's people is not the same as seeing clearly (see Lk 11:27-28, 29-32; 13:26-27). The gospel, the good news of God's kingdom, has spread beyond those who look at it and pass by it. In this passage, the initial recognition is that this one who has spoken is Joseph's boy, one of us. Jesus speaks in three distinct statements in verses 23-24 to distance himself from their assumptions about him. These three statements can be understood as proverb, challenge and pronouncement.

Verse 22 contains the first glimmer of contrast. In this single verse we have the affirmative response of the hometown boy's presentation and the question, Don't we know him? Jesus seems to cut off their process of thinking or read their minds as he responds in this first movement with a maxim in what appears to be an abrupt comeback.¹ "Doubtless, you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!"

We have no other record of this quote preceding Jesus' speaking of it. It may have been a common proverb in Jesus' day but the derivation is unknown. In fact, it is even peculiar to call it a proverb. It has no comparison, and little to commend it as wisdom. Perhaps it carries the tone of "people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

It can be considered reasonable to assume that a "good physician" would follow the behavior that she knows would bring good health. But is this reasoned conclusion a wisdom saying? If so, we can only assume its record has been lost to us. More important in Luke's telling is the question

that arises, why did Jesus respond this way? Is he picking a fight? Is he responding to their tone, which is unrecorded except for the single question, “Isn’t this Joseph’s boy?”

Perhaps it is here we are glimpsing the darker side of God coming into the world. God’s own Son, returning to preach the good news to his own people, will be received with skepticism that will turn to violence. The preacher of good news becomes the one at risk of losing his life. And perhaps it is the first strong word in Luke that what will be required of the followers of Jesus is more than listening to preaching. As John Stendahl points out, Jesus

preaches, but does not heal the sick nor expel evil spirits; the kingdom of God does not manifest itself in full power in Nazareth. This also shows that “proclamation” alone may not always manifest the fullness of the year of God’s favor. The rushing in of the kingdom can fail to reach its aim. Whether that is due to the Lord’s choice, the people’s reactions, or both is left open by Luke’s editorial.²

The second statement of three in this section is that implication that these hometown folks are put off by what they have heard Jesus has been doing elsewhere. They would expect him to save his best work, his most powerful show, his richest blessing for those he knows best. One question that arises here in Luke’s telling is the obvious *disorder* of saying that he is returning from Capernaum to Nazareth and that they have heard about what he did there. If Luke’s concern is orderly chronology, it seems clear that the unit of 4:31-37 should come before this. Jesus is in Capernaum, healing and speaking with great power and the word spreads. Has he already been preaching and healing in

other places or has he just come from the desert and temptations as Luke 4:1-16 records?

In this story in Mark and Matthew, Jesus has been at work a while before this event takes place. The word has spread about his healings and teachings. So the question again arises, what did Luke find more important than following chronology? Luke doesn’t try to cover this editing; rather, he points directly to what is important. He sets the start of Jesus’ ministry in the words of the prophet Isaiah and in Jesus’ own recognition that to speak this way about God’s kingdom is sure to disturb those who are most familiar with the patterns of Judaism and the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus’ public ministry is given its focus in this passage by Luke.³

And the third statement gives further focus to who Jesus is. It places in Jesus’ own mouth the determination of the messiah as prophet. “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” He has stood before them and read from the scroll of Isaiah. He has read them beloved words of hope and promise. He is telling them the day of this promise has arrived. And as hometown boy he now makes clear that he is also sage and prophet.

He comes using the forms that are familiar to them, proverbs and scripture reading. And yet he confronts them with his content. Their response, while not as yet described, is shaped by his words as disbelieving. Either he does not expect to be well received, or their response is already becoming evident. It falls into the pattern of how the prophets of old were received. It places Jesus again within the boundaries and patterns of Judaism. It demonstrates Jesus’ knowledge and understanding of Hebrew history. He knows that God’s messengers have been rejected in the

past. (Luke raises this theme again in 11:49-52; 13:32-35; 20:10-12; Acts 7:51-53.)

It is in this statement where Jesus begins to focus on what he builds in the next section—the teaching and illustrations that show that familiarity and proximity are often what blinds the people of God to the very work of God.

Summary

Primary conflict here isn't between Jesus' teachings and Judaism, but between Judaism and its own scriptures. Jesus reads to them from Isaiah and then shows them how God is enlarging beyond the boundaries they have created and used scripture to shore up.

Conventional wisdom says a physician should be the most well.

Conventional wisdom says familiarity breeds contempt.

Conventional wisdom says hometown folks know home-grown boys well enough to see through their preaching.

God's wisdom has something unconventional to bring to God's people. And those who identify themselves within the religious structures may not be as comfortable with this unconventional force of the spirit in the world as they are with their conventional wisdom.

Luke 4:23-24 functions as two verses with three statements that link the setting of Jesus within the context of Jewish worship and scripture with the message of Jesus to those who believe they have the inside track. Luke shows us through these verses of Jesus' response to their conventional wisdom that God will not be limited by what "most

people think," nor will God's movement be limited by the church's interpretation of the words of the prophets.

God won't be waiting for those "inside" to get the message straight. God will be out among the ones in need of healing, the ones who hear the word of promise in the mouth of God's prophet.

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¹For an interesting and lively discussion of why Jesus might be "picking a fight" here, see John Stehdahl's "The Offense," in *The Christian Century*. (Chicago: Jan 21, 1998. Vol. 115, Issue 2), 53.

²Ibid.

³For further exploration of Luke's use of structure to give emphasis to this sermon, see Jacques Matthey, "Luke 4:16-30—The Spirit's Mission Manifesto—Jesus' Hermeneutics—and Luke's Editorial" in *International Review of Mission*. (Geneva: Jan 2000, Vol. 89, Issue 352), 3.

Luke 4:25-27

Introduction

Three important events in the life of Jesus provide the context for Jesus' reference to the prophets Elijah and Elisha in Luke 4:25-27: his baptism, his temptation and the beginning of his Galilean ministry. Apart from these events, Jesus' comments about Elijah and Elisha lose relevance.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the account of Jesus' wilderness temptation is immediately preceded by his baptism. Clearly in the Synoptic Gospels the baptism and temptation accounts are linked. One could argue, as an interesting possibility for interpretation, that the baptism of Jesus be viewed as the first temptation. The Matthean account particularly lends itself to this possibility in the conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist concerning who should be baptizing whom.

If one views the baptism of Jesus as a temptation, what is the nature of the temptation? The temptation is for Jesus to exempt himself from the claims of John the Baptist about repentance. In the Synoptic Gospels, repentance primarily means a radical change of mind—a new perspective that alters the course of one's life. Being sorry for one's sins perhaps is the byproduct of a radical change of mind, but remorse is not the primary notion in repentance.

Given this primary idea of repentance, Jesus did not have a past to confess, but he did have a future to consecrate. Only a radical resolve to live from his own sense of God's will would steel Jesus to withstand the sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle attempts by others to manipulate the course of his life. In submitting to be baptized by John, Jesus did three things: he fully endorsed the ministry

of John the Baptist; he identified with the common people in humility rather than placing himself above them; and he accepted God's endorsement as beloved son, placing himself squarely in the prophetic tradition. In summary, the baptism of Jesus underscored that no person or group of persons can claim privilege with God.

The temptation account makes the same point with greater intensity and complexity. Unless Jesus struggled with these decisions in the wilderness and unless he gave serious consideration to acting upon these highly nuanced but ultimately diabolic visions, he was not truly tempted—"a temptation is not a temptation unless it's a temptation."

Jesus had options. He could have followed the course of providing food as the primary focus of his ministry. And would not that have been a good thing? He could have focused on political solutions to redress oppressive conditions that had lingered for centuries in his homeland. And would not that have been a good thing? He could have invoked divine action to protect himself and others from the tragedies of life. And would not that have been a good thing? However, in all of the above scenarios, would these have been the best things? In the wilderness, Jesus strengthened his resolve made at his baptism to follow the solitary path of divine obedience that would be so misunderstood by even those closest to him.

Following the temptation in the wilderness, the Synoptic Gospels launch into the Galilean ministry of Jesus. Through preaching, teaching and healing (including the exorcism of demons), Jesus demonstrated that the kingdom of God was drawing near. Although the baptism and the temptation in the wilderness had fortified Jesus for his public ministry, these prior experiences did not make Jesus impervious to the emotional turmoil raised within him because of others

attempting to manipulate his ministry to personal advantage. The Gospels portray Jesus having to repeatedly withdraw from the crowds to reconnect with his spiritual center and renew his commitment to his solitary divine vision. Frequently, Jesus felt the tension between his vision from God and popular expectations that others placed upon him.

That tension is clearly revealed in Luke's account of Jesus' visit to a synagogue in Nazareth, where he had grown up. Having read from the scroll a section of Isaiah that portrayed the Isaianic hope for a just and joyous restoration of God's order for the world, Jesus commented: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). The congregation responded to Jesus' reading and his commentary with enthusiasm and a degree of surprise. They delighted in the poise and confidence of their hometown boy.

Jesus, however, displayed cynicism with regard to their initial enthusiasm, and he leveled an indictment against them. We should note that the rejection of Jesus by the synagogue crowd occurred only after he took a negative tone toward them. Why did Jesus not revel in their hometown pride? Why did Jesus so quickly move to an indictment, stating that a prophet is not honored in his hometown? We may assume that Jesus sensed that the Nazareth synagogue crowd misunderstood the intent of his reading and his commentary. Rather than the words of Scripture and Jesus' commentary challenging them, the people took these words as reinforcement for deep seated theological, social and political biases that divided the world into "us" and "them."

The interpretation that the synagogue crowd preferred turned in a nationalistic and provincial direction. The

congregants overly identified themselves as victims: they were the poor; they were the captives; they were the ones who had been blinded; they were the oppressed; they were the beneficiaries of the Lord's Jubilee. They were the ones who had been wronged, and God would punish their enemies who had afflicted them through the ages. Here we need to be clear.

The problem was not that they identified, to some degree, with victimization; the problem was that they overly identified with the role of victim. They made no room for the possibility that the "them" could be beneficiaries of the Lord's Jubilee as well. The constant bane of organized religion through the centuries has been the tendency to divide people into the "insiders" and the "outsiders"—the "us" and the "them."

Commentary

4:25-27

²⁵"But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

Jesus referenced two stories about prophets, one involving Elijah and one involving Elisha, to challenge the people's nationalistic and provincial biases. Both stories focus on marginalized persons. In the Elijah story (1 Kings 17:1-16), the prophet ministered to a Gentile widow who would also lose her only son to death. As a woman, as a widow, as a sonless mother, as a Gentile, she represents the "down and out." In the Elisha story (2 Kings 5:1-14), the prophet healed

a powerful Gentile military leader who, despite his reputation, had been stigmatized by a socially unacceptable disease. As a man, as a military leader, as a Gentile, as a leper who was once a healthy person, he represents the “up and out.”

In relating these stories, Jesus used irony to confront the exclusivity of the congregation. He noted that in Elijah’s day there were many widows in Israel, yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, only to a Gentile woman in Phoenician territory. Similarly, Jesus said that there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha’s day, but only Naaman, a Syrian, was cleansed.

Does this mean that God did not care for Israelite widows or Israelite lepers? Of course not. Rather, Jesus used irony to underscore God’s concern for all persons. Jesus’ use of irony is reminiscent of the similar usage by the prophet Amos, who said, “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord” (Amos 9:7). Amos’s statement is much stronger than another possibility that he could have used: “Are the Ethiopians not like you to me?” By saying that God loved the Israelites as much as he loved the Ethiopians rather than the other way around, the people of Israel were moved from center stage.

Huston Smith, eminent scholar of world religions, believes that the prophetic movement in Judaism evolved through three stages. One may also add that these three phases reflect a progression in the maturity of theological perspective in any religious tradition. In its initial stage, prophecy was connected with guilds of prophets. The primary activity involved a collective ecstatic event, designed to produce a state of divine intoxication.

With the advent of the pre-writing prophets—Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and others, a second stage emerged. Emphasis

shifted from ecstatic experience to ethics. One connected to God not so much through extraordinary trances or visions, but through a life committed to mercy, faithfulness and justice. The third stage of the prophetic tradition arrived with the writing prophets: Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and others. Concern for the social implications of mercy, faithfulness and justice became pronounced in their oracles.

Jesus, in referencing stories involving the ministries of Elijah and Elisha to those marginalized and excluded from Israel’s tradition, advocated that authentic religion does not pander to privilege; rather, it supports the marginalized and despised. A closer examination of these two stories involving the ministries of Elijah and Elisha to those outside the tradition of Israel reveals greater insight into Jesus’ understanding of his prophetic role.

Several interesting parallels emerge concerning Elijah and Jesus when one explores the story found in 1 Kings 17:1-16. Elijah emerged on the stage of Israel’s history in this story. The narrator gives the reader no lead-in. Elijah abruptly appeared on the scene and announced to King Ahab that a drought was coming. The drought served to prove that the LORD, not the Canaanite fertility religion involving the deities Baal and Asherah, controls the weather. The name Elijah means “YWWH is God”—a fitting name for one who challenged a monarchy committed to the worship of Baal and Asheroth. The name Jesus—Yeshua—means “YHWH saves.” The beginnings of the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus are similar to that of Elijah. John and Jesus arrived on the scene with a similar immediacy, demanding repentance because the kingdom of God was drawing near.

God directed the course of Elijah’s life and God promised to take care of Elijah’s basic necessities. The instruments

of provision are noteworthy. None was reliable or trustworthy from the perspective of conventional wisdom. Water from a wadi was not a reliable or consistent source for drinking water. Ravens were notorious for their ravening appetites, not for sharing food with humans. Poor, foreign widows were not to be trusted as a reliable or trustworthy source for food. However, in God's economy the world is turned topsy-turvy in its conventional wisdom. Similarly, Jesus followed the course of his Father's direction, which led him to a radical trust in God's provision from unlikely sources.

Elijah demanded water and then food from the Phoenician widow. In a time of drought, the woman's act of providing water was an expensive hospitality. Two possibilities emerge to explain her action. One possibility is that she acted with true compassion towards a stranger and foreigner. Another is that she felt she had no choice as a woman; she had to respond to this man's demand. Elijah's demand for food, however, seemed too much to her. With only enough provision to provide herself and her son (who was still living at this point in the story) for one last meal, she explained her dire situation and expectation of death. Elijah admonished her not to be afraid but to obey him. He called on her to feed him first, then to feed herself and her son. He promised that God would not let her run out of food during the drought.

The woman obeyed Elijah and she discovered that he was right about God's promise not to let her run out of food. Some stories of Jesus in the Gospels relate a similar theme. Jesus challenged potential followers to give up security in order to gain the wealth of the kingdom. Certainly the command not to fear repeated itself in Jesus' teachings. Radical obedience to the demands of following Jesus offered unconventional but genuine rewards.

The story of Elisha's healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-14 illustrates that inclusion is more expansive than concern for the poor and defenseless among foreigners. Privileged and powerful foreigners are also within the purview of God's concern. The name Elisha means "God is salvation." Interestingly, the name Jesus combines elements from the names of the two prophets under consideration: Elijah (YHWH is God)—Elisha (God is salvation).

Despite his successful career as a military leader for Aram (Syria) and the power and perks that accompanied such success, Naaman could not escape the commonality of human experience with regard to the fragility of health. Interestingly, Naaman is identified by name in contrast to the Phoenician widow in the Elijah story. Illness, tragedy and death strike the socially elite as well as the masses. Although he had made a name for himself, Naaman's reputation did not spare him an ordeal related to his health. Leprosy in the context of biblical narrative did not carry the modern meaning of the term. Various infectious and sometimes contagious skin maladies were described under this designation. Perhaps because of the uncertainty of the nature of such diseases, skin ailments were greatly feared in antiquity and were one of the most common reasons for social alienation and stigmatization.

Naaman's journey towards health began with the courage of an unnamed person who in the conventional scheme was socially inferior to him in almost all ways. An Israelite slave girl, who served Naaman's wife and who may well have been captured by Naaman's army, boldly professed to Naaman's wife her confidence that an Israelite prophet could heal Naaman. Following the proper social protocol and ordering of communication—slave girl to Naaman's wife, Naaman's wife to Naaman, Naaman to the king of Aram, the king of Aram to the king of Israel via letter and

appropriate gifts—Naaman went to Israel seeking healing. As frequently happens in international relations then and now, the king of Israel did not trust the motives behind the request and interpreted the actions in a pretense for hostility. Hostility and hospitality have a similar etymology. The line between friend and foe has always been easily blurred and through mistrust the guest becomes the enemy.

Elisha intervened at this point, breaking the socially accepted sequence of protocol. Elisha demanded that the king of Israel send Naaman to see him that Naaman might know that there was a prophet in Israel. Here we sense the clash between authentic power in the LORD and the bluster of pomp and circumstance. Elisha offended Naaman by not greeting him personally and by asking him to do a ritually humbling act in washing in the Jordan seven times. Naaman flared in anger, protesting both the perceived lack of social respect on the part of Elisha and the ridiculous nature of Elisha's demand. From Naaman's perspective, Elisha acted the part of the victor rather than the vanquished and Naaman could not tolerate it. However, cooler heads prevailed and Naaman finally submitted to Elisha's instructions, resulting in Naaman's healing.

Much like Elisha, Jesus challenged the accepted social protocol throughout his ministry. Some followers of Jesus, similar to Naaman of old, broke through the prejudice of social pride and reconstructed their lives on a new foundation based in humility. The vast majority of those disciples, however, came from the same ranks as the slave girl in the Naaman story. They were the nameless who believed that their names were written in the Lamb's book of life.

Summary

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus gained clarity about who he was and what he would do. By challenging the theological, social and political biases of the synagogue crowd in Nazareth, Jesus chose a solitary path of divine vision that aligned with the paths of Elijah and Elisha.

Through the experiences of his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness and the inauguration of his public ministry, Jesus committed his way to divine hospitality that would be met ultimately with human hostility. The synagogue incident in Nazareth foreshadowed what lay ahead one particular Passover in Jerusalem.

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Luke 4:28-30

Introduction

N. T. Wright, the great New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham, England, tells of a fellow bishop who said, “Why is it when St. Paul went into a town they had a riot, but when I go to a town they have me for tea?”

That is the question confronting the culturally accommodated American church. It is worth pondering in this context that the least churching region of the United States in the early 19th century was the American South, now known as “the Bible Belt.” Sometime around 1830, Southern preachers—tired of empty pews and empty coffers—began to downplay the “love thy neighbor as thyself” part of the Gospel as it related to one’s enslaved neighbors. By ending the practical application of the Gospel to African Americans, the way was clear for widespread acceptance of the message, “God loves you...and other whites.”

In other words, the churches flourished as a direct result of downplaying the implications of the Gospel for specific groups of people whom the majority did not want to include.

In Luke 4:22, Jesus, having endured the temptations in the wilderness, faces the temptation to which Luke 4:13 alludes: “the devil ... departed from him until an opportune time.” As he begins his ministry in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth, he is greeted with warmhearted acceptance. This is the great danger for any prophet. The venerable commentary on Luke’s Gospel by Alfred Plummer holds that *ethaumadzo* “expresses agreement rather than admiration,” but the latest commentators tend to agree with Francois Bovon in *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*

(1:1-9:50), that it means “to be amazed” in a positive sense.

These nuances are captured by the Baptist Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, who translated verse 22: “So they all began to bear witness to him and to marvel at the words of grace...” The word *martureo* that Robertson translates as “bear witness” has the even more positive connotation of “praise” according to I. Howard Marshall’s commentary. At the very least, it means “to speak well of” according to Bovon and others. *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, published by the United Bible Society, gives the meanings “to speak well of” or “to approve of.”

The critical point is that the words that Jesus spoke from Isaiah’s scroll, and his general statement that they were now fulfilled, met with warm acceptance. Why not relish the fact that in preaching about God’s grace he has heard a chorus of heartfelt amens? Because Jesus knows that it is the false prophets who have been celebrated while the true prophets of God have met a chilly reception, or worse.

Moses was almost killed by the people of God; Jeremiah was thrown to the bottom of a well while the king destroyed what he had written, and Daniel had to face death in a pit filled with lions. Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist, had anticipated Christ’s approach to widespread acceptance. When the crowds came to the Jordan River and surged forward to be baptized (Lk 3:7), John stopped them in their tracks. He knew that a mass acceptance of his message likely meant that his message had been fundamentally misunderstood, so he kept preaching until he had winnowed down the number of those who would accept the good news.

Now that the One who was to come with a winnowing fork in his hand (Lk 3:17) has arrived, the process would intensify.

Commentary

4:28-30

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

It is a fallacy that Jesus was rejected because he talked about God's grace. In fact, it is the words of grace that come from his mouth that lead to the warmhearted embrace of his message. "Grace" (*charis*), which in Luke 2:40 was applied to Jesus, is in Luke 4:22 spoken of by Jesus. I. Howard Marshall and most other commentators agree that the emphasis here is on the fact that his words are filled with divine grace.

Jesus' synagogue congregation did not mind hearing about God's grace. So how in the world do we get from this moment of celebration of the hometown boy to verse 28, where the synagogue worshippers are in a state of *thumos*, a "high degree of anger" or "rage" according to the *Translator's Handbook*, and "fury" according to many others.

The commentators agree that Jesus was opposed by the synagogue crowd because he spoke of God's grace as extending to the enemies of Israel. But in literally every commentary consulted, the issue of God's grace is framed in solely religious terms: small-minded synagogue members versus God's boundless grace for all. There is some truth to this, but it does not account for the visceral horror that Jesus' hearers felt.

Frankly, why would a crowd be incited to murder someone who says, "God loves everyone"? Jesus' earlier words about God's grace met with approval in verse 22, but once he used the names of the sworn enemies of Israel, he was no longer viewed as simply a preacher of grace. Instead, he was viewed as a traitor, someone whose lack of patriotism for Israel was shown in his teaching that God loved "those people." This was not purely a religious fight—as ugly as those can be—it was an issue of ethnic identity and national security.

In his book *God's Long Summer*, Charles Marsh, the director of the Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia and son of a Baptist minister, writes about those who supported, ignored or violently opposed the Civil Rights movement. His research has shown him that those very few white ministers on the side of the angels preached just like their uninvolved colleagues. All of them talked about God's love. The difference is that when a handful of ministers preached about loving your neighbor, they explicitly mentioned that this included one's black neighbors. Many of these men received death threats and lost their jobs, all for moving from talking about grace in the abstract to talking about it in a very specific way. It takes courage to name names and to apply the general truths of the faith to specific circumstances.

Baptist preacher and New Testament scholar Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch translation of the New Testament into the Southern vernacular has attained iconic status. In 1942 he founded Koinonia Farms, an interracial Christian community in Americus, Georgia. His and other families soon came under death threats. Their children were beaten up at school and the local business and farming community boycotted Koinonia Farms. (That is the reason they began their popular mail order business.) In spite of the threats,

Jordan hewed to God's New Testament vision for a Christian community that transcends racial boundaries.

Most of us want to please people, not anger them. Consequently, we stop with good words about God's love and justice, without descending into the messy particularities of how that looks. For example, if I love my Mexican neighbors as myself, how can I blithely benefit from their low-wage work without raising a finger to help them by striving for economic justice? If God loves Iraqis and Palestinians as much as Americans and Israelis, how can I stomach a Holy Land tour—let alone American foreign policy—that neglects issues of justice for Palestinians? How can I say God loves everyone and acquiesce in a ginned up “holy war” that pits the “Christian” West against the “Muslim terrorist” Middle East?

One can prattle all day in American pulpits about love for others, but what would happen if one dared advocate closing Guantanamo? Or ending support for “the war on drugs” as an excuse to support the murderous Columbian government and their death squads? Or scrapping all U.S. nuclear weapons because they are inherently immoral to use—even on North Koreans or Iranians? If one names names, then one is viewed as politicizing the Gospel. But this is not politicization. It is application of the truth of God's universal love to our own particular historical circumstance.

Jesus received accolades for his religious insights until he used the name of an enemy general as the recipient of God's love. At that very mention of a Syrian general (v 27), the worshippers rose up against Jesus. Since the worshippers would be sitting, “rise up” (v 29) is literal. Yet the word *anistamai* also carries the connotation of hostile action according to Marshall and others. They rose up in order to,

as the *Translator's Handbook* puts it, “drive [Jesus] out forcibly” so they could throw him from a cliff.

This extraordinary act was not unheard of in the Greek-speaking world. Greek actually has a verb meaning “to throw down a cliff.” Some commentators, like Joel Green in *The Gospel of Luke*, believe that the throwing off the cliff was a prelude to stoning to death according to Jewish law (Deut 13:1-11). In any case, this is more of a lynching than the formal execution envisaged by Jewish law—and it takes place on the sabbath.

Nazareth was a place of cliffs, but “the brow of the hill on which the town was built” (v 29) does not give an accurate feel for the topography. Plummer offers three options regarding where the attempted assassination happened: a precipice, varying from 80 to 300 feet in height, which exists some distance off the southeast of the town; a cliff that has since crumbled away; or the 30- to 40-foot cliff that looms over the town to this day.

Jesus' courage is astounding. He refused to take back one word he had said, even in the face of death. Contrast our Lord's bravery with that of the flagship educational institution of the SBC, Southern Seminary. It repented of one of the very few good deeds it ever did to oppose the racial terrorism abetted by Southern churches. The seminary invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to preach at a chapel service in 1961. Once word got out that he had spoken there, the southwide firestorm of criticism led Southern Seminary to formally apologize for having ever invited Dr. King to speak, and to make clear that such a lapse in judgment would never happen again. And it never did.

The outstanding Baptist New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper sums up, in his article on the Gospel of Luke in

The Interpreter's Bible (1995 edition), the passage that concludes with verses 28-30:

“Not only is this scene paradigmatic of Jesus’ life and ministry, but it is also a reminder that God’s grace is never subject to the limitations of any nation, church group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God’s grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. . . . The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. Jesus could do no more for his hometown because they were not open to him.”

Helmut Gollwitzer in *Die Freude Gottes: Einfuhrung in das Lukasevangelium*, observes that the stumbling block here is not the person of Jesus, since “he now preaches the arrival of salvation, without making known that he is the Savior.” Jesus puts his work in the larger context of God’s work throughout history. Jesus is not the beginning of God’s salvation, nor does his arrival herald the end of God’s world-historical work of redemption. Christ is the literal embodiment of the salvation of God, but it is a salvation without impact unless his hearers allow themselves to be swept up in the ongoing work of God’s grace in the world.

It was not only the universality of God’s grace that got the worshippers hopping mad on that long ago sabbath. It was the idea that God had extended help to outsiders and not done it for God’s chosen people. The “many widows in Israel” and the “many lepers in Israel” were not fed nor cured by God. Instead, they were passed over as God

extended mercy to a foreign widow and a foreign general. Far from being a parable about God never playing favorites, it is precisely the opposite: God is shown in these instances to favor the suffering outsider over the insider. God can choose to work there and not here, among the outcast and not the insider, on behalf of those we don’t care about instead of among those we love so much.

In the face of the murderous fury of the crowd, we read, “But he. . .” (v 30). It is worth noting that *autos de* is emphatic in Greek. He did not join them by becoming furious at their fury, and he did not meet their violence with violence. “But he,” in contrast to all that they were doing and planning to do to him, coolly made the next move. N. T. Wright notes the irony in Luke for everyone: “the devil invited Jesus to throw himself down. . . . Jesus, having refused, found himself in a similar predicament.”

Summary

Once again, Jesus effects an extraordinary escape. Here, he passes through the crowds, which—as Joel Green says—both reminds us of his victory over Satan’s temptation and prefigures his escape from death through the resurrection.

Virtually no commentators view this as a miracle in the strict sense. It is an example of Jesus’ power, the same power John shows Jesus exercising over the detachment of soldiers who came to arrest him: “When Jesus said, ‘I am he,’ they stepped back and fell to the ground” (Jn 18:6). Plummer is almost alone among commentators, but insightful, when he writes, “They had asked for a miracle, and this was the miracle granted to them.”

In any event, Jesus is in control here. As he says in John's Gospel, "I lay down my life...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17 ff.). His ministry is not slowed down in the least, but as verse 30 states, he "went on his way."

The town that is forever associated with Jesus of Nazareth was the first to reject him. The worship services did not stop, and no one missed him on the next sabbath, but this is the last time Jesus is known to have shown up there.

One fears that Nazareth may not be the only place where this is true.

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