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Chapter 13

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Patrick R. Keifert

And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

(Mark 16:8)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

(John 14:6)

THE PROBLEMATIC: WHY IS THE BIBLE SO OFTEN ABSENT IN PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS IN CHURCH AND WORLD?

These two passages, the Markan description of the faithful remnant of women running from the tomb in terror and amazement and the Johannine Jesus’ confident self-identification as the way, the truth, and the life, capture the dynamic polarities of the conversation and inquiry that drove the life and work of Donald H. Juel. The exploring and managing of these polarities rather than resolving them to one side or the other generated tremendous energy in the same way that the strength of electrical poles, positive and negative, generate electricity in a battery. The silence of the Bible in much contemporary public conversation and the continuing presence of the universal truth claims regarding Jesus empowered his scholarship, teaching, and preaching.

For over twenty years, my good friend and colleague Donald H. Juel and I reflected together within this polarity on the place of the Bible in modern
theological education and public conversation. This essay sketches why we set out together on that journey and how we engage others, and offers some brief reflections about why these travels are so necessary, not only to the life of the church but to the flourishing of our postmodern world.

Though we found a plenitude of ways to describe what we were trying to learn, one question, in two parts, serves to capture our inquiry: “When we say the Bible is true, what do we mean? And what methods of interpretation appreciate its truthfulness?” We came to this question as we explored two locations in which the Bible is commonly thought to be central, indeed critical, to theological discourse: the academy, especially theological institutions and departments of religion, and the Christian congregation.

As we ventured out for answers, we began by reflecting upon how various centers of learning within the academy understood the Bible as true, and what methods of interpretation they used to appreciate its truthfulness. We were curious not only about how particular methods of interpretation and application were justified but also how those methods actually are used in practical situations by those who espouse them. As time went on and the significant conflict among scholars and disciplines on these questions became more apparent, we became more and more interested in how our colleagues in the academy actually persuaded each other to change their minds regarding these questions.

As another part of our journey, we focused on how people encountered the Bible in moral conversations in the congregations, and particularly how scholars, teachers, and congregational leaders used the Bible to convince those diverse audiences of a moral or interpretive position. The congregational practices we found were, in a few instances, quite encouraging, but more often than not, what we saw was discouraging.

The realities of these practices in both the academy and church caused us to reexamine the use of the Bible in theological education. To begin with, we found that our own previous academic training was, at least in part, disturbingly inadequate in preparing us to pursue these questions of truth, and that various individuals and structures within the academy employed practices of critique and persuasion that were equally inadequate. Our academic training had caused us to wonder about the relationship between traditional claims that the Bible is true and the methods we used and taught for interpreting the Bible.

For us, as for other modern students of the Bible, history was the primary “mode of intelligibility,” the key methodology we had learned for understanding the truth claims of the Bible. However, we joined many students of the Bible who have found that such a method has led to an unhappy and dysfunctional divide between what we, following Martin Buss, have called “critical description and capricious faith”; that is, between empirical or rationalist engagement with the text as a historical document and nonrational commitments to the Bible as the word of God.

This complete separation between two approaches to the role of the Bible—critical description and capricious faith—proved to be present in the thought and
practice of the academy as well as the congregation. Indeed, the divide was especially noticeable in conversations and decisions of Christian congregations on morally controversial issues.

Our research on congregations in deep conflict over morally disputed topics such as sexuality, war, and worship uncovered ironic and disturbing patterns in the ways the Bible was used. The higher the anxiety was on a moral issue in a congregation, the less likely it was that leaders would turn to the Bible in hope of even aiding, much less transforming, the conversation. This pattern of avoiding discussion of the Bible altogether in these circumstances was as typical of congregational leaders who made very strong claims for the authority and truthfulness of the Bible as for those who made much more modest claims. In short, whatever theory and doctrine of the Bible as authority and source of truth these leaders and their congregations avowed, there was a clear correlation between heightened anxiety and the practice of avoiding the Bible. To make matters worse, as anxiety increased, leaders expressed fear that the Bible would contribute to, if not cause, dysfunctional conflict in their congregations.

In these crises of congregational conflict, we identified two dominant congregational habits in the use of the Bible, named for their seeming effects on civil conversation within the congregation: "Bible bullets" and "pious syrup."

In a majority of cases in which the Bible was used to consider morally disputed topics, parties to the dispute tended to perceive the Bible as a source of ammunition to fire at the opposition in an ongoing war whose purpose was to obliterate the adverse position from the community. Unsurprisingly, rather than informing or persuading any conversation partners to change their minds or even to come to a peaceful agreement to disagree in love, these uses of the Bible invariably ended conversation, no matter whether the text was employed by so-called conservatives or liberals. After all, bullets are intended to end a conversation with an opponent, not to foster it.

Others, especially those who hated conflict or saw it as unchristian, responded to increasing anxiety in the congregational system by avoiding a sustained engagement with the Bible, instead pronouncing broad and saccharine judgments to "resolve" the conflict. The language used—for example, "The Bible's message is love, and so we should do the loving thing"—showed up often in these moments of high anxiety. Pouring such pious syrup upon the conversation smothered the life out of it, ironically demanding that those in conflict simply stop the conversation. The result, though perhaps less invasively violent, was nonetheless as deadly to honest moral conversation as the Bible bullet approach.

When researchers shared these observations with theological leaders, especially those with degrees from established schools of theology, we found that few were surprised by our findings. In fact, they were surprised we found them remarkable at all.

When we probed for the reason that congregations avoided the Bible in these conflicts, congregational leaders, especially those with MDiv degrees, admitted
that they withdrew from engaging the Bible in morally disputed topics precisely because they found the use of the Bible so dysfunctional to genuine conversation. Furthermore, even when they led Bible studies during times of congregational conflict, they tended to keep to a purely descriptive and factual engagement with the text. Indeed, they found that the process of making a move from the Bible to judgments on the questions at hand was threatening to their very role as leader.6

To be sure, a small number of congregational leaders took these opportunities for engagement of the biblical text to move toward strong advocacy of their own moral positions. However, we found that the results of this engaged advocacy were minimal; their advocacy attracted those in agreement with them, but it seldom expanded the number of those who shared each leader’s position or deepened a particular congregation’s engagement with the issue at hand. We concluded that unless we were prepared to accept this sort of thinly instrumental notion of the role of the congregation and its conversations in public life, we needed to discover another set of practices for the use of the Bible in theological conversation.7

Conversely, and perhaps more interestingly, we identified numerous congregational leaders who admitted that their own study of the Bible remained focused on the search for the original meaning of the Bible within its own context,8 but it was hardly ever employed in practical reflection on contemporary morally disputed topics. In fact, many congregational leaders believed that their theological education had only succeeded in helping them to see the vast cultural and historical distance between the Bible and the present culture. The practical outcome of this lesson in what Paul Ricoeur aptly names “distanciation,”9 however, was that such leaders avoided normative discourse within their congregations at all costs. In short, their education had helped them to see what the Bible was not good for, but it had not helped them see what it was good for. Theological education had not helped them find a way of engaging the Bible even in disputes in their own congregation, among people who presumably shared much in the way of commitments, much less outside their congregation among those who did not share Christian faith.

This behavior that we observed among research subjects follows a pattern we have seen in most of our students over the past twenty years.10 When our students were asked to write about the truth of the Bible and methods of interpretation, they spent most of their time arguing for a rejection of a “literalist” or “fundamentalist” position. However, they were genuinely unable to imagine or articulate a positive argument for the truth of the Bible and the appropriate methods of interpretation, to describe how the Bible might help us see what we should do in contemporary life. Although these seminarians have varied by age, ethnicity, gender, political stance, and biblical literacy over this time period, we have observed very little variation in this “strange silence”11 about the role of the Bible in our common life in the church.12
TOWARD A NEW MOMENT: RHETORICAL RATIONALITY ENCOUNTERS THE BIBLE

As we reflected on the set of problems associated with use of the Bible in our own scholarship and teaching, and in the practices of congregational leaders, Donald and I found strong consonance between the disturbing patterns we were witnessing and the analysis of several scholars who have called for a postmodern retrieval of the ancient rhetorical tradition to shape secular public discourse. Donald joined me in studying how the work of three of my teachers at the University of Chicago—Wayne C. Booth, Stephen Toulmin, and Paul Ricoeur (who had informed my early itinerary of reflection on rhetorical approaches)—might teach the church about its own conversations.

We were aware that the term's "rhetoric" and "rhetorical rationality" were not going to seem immediately inviting to potential sojourners. Indeed, "rhetoric" suffers from a crisis in public relations. In public life, we often hear the expression "mere rhetoric." Those who employ it do so with some suspicion that their audience is being manipulated rather than convinced. Their use of the term suggests that to them, "rhetoric" refers to the means of communication, the outward form rather than the inner substance of a message. Or, again, we commonly refer to "rhetorical questions" as questions to which the answer is already assumed, which need no discussion.

Though this is not what we mean by rhetoric, this common usage of the word "rhetorical" captures something at the core of proposals for rhetorical rationality—namely, that rhetoric actually pays attention to the audience and what it assumes to be the case in the world in which the audience lives. Rather than presuming to create a universal, pure, rational, neutral discourse, rhetorical rationality humbly confesses to its particularity to audience, place, time, and so forth.

Aristotle, in developing his theory of rhetorical rationality, notes that all speeches reveal three characters: the character of the speaker (ethos), the character of the speech (logos), and the character of the audience (pathos). Thus, rhetorical rationality understands that all discourse takes place within a particular setting, that it is aimed at a particular audience and is delivered by particular speakers who employ assumed warrants and backing for their claims within a moral field. It is about character. We might say that it is this moral embeddedness of all discourse, indeed of all knowledge, in implicit values or human interests of particular times and places that much of the intellectual project of modernity has sought to escape.

Modernity has been skeptical of the rhetorical project, pointing to the history of human violence and oppression as its fruits; the chief project of modernity was to imagine a kind of pure reason and pure language (e.g., mathematics) based upon objective facts that would be so indisputable as to avoid at least violent conflict in the modern world. Of course, we need to acknowledge that rhetoric was suspect in the ancient world as well. Its ancient opponents, including Plato,
attacked rhetoric as a rejection of the search for truth in favor of the morally suspect act of persuasion. Especially in its Latin forms, the rhetorical tradition, which attended extensively to style and aimed at the passions, seemed to confirm the suspicions of its opponents.18

We were quite aware of this public relations crisis with our chosen approach when we turned to these three scholars. Even though they represent three different strains of Western philosophy, these scholars concur in rather significant ways with the analysis of this problematic on the use of the Bible and on the promise of the rhetorical approach in responding to it. Our conversation with these three thinkers deepened our analysis and funded our growing sense that a rhetorical approach to theological education in general, and especially for deploying the Bible in that setting, held some hope for the church.

Perhaps Booth’s early work, The Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent,19 clarified our initial diagnosis of the situation best. This volume, which published lectures he delivered to undergraduates of the University of Notre Dame in the spring of 1970, reflects the realities of that turbulent time in American society. Then dean at the University of Chicago, Booth had been granted leave by student protesters, who had placed him under “house arrest” in the University’s administration building, in order to travel and deliver the lectures at Notre Dame.

Nevertheless, Booth’s telling lectures about the collapse of public discourse on the college campuses found less fault with the students and more with the failure of his colleagues in the elite circles of the academy. In Booth’s view, they had failed to engage in sustained reflection with one another on the questions of the day because they uncritically accepted a set of deep assumptions about the relationship of truth seeking and the good of the community in public conversation. He called this dysfunctional set of assumptions the “modern dogma.” These assumptions revealed a deep divide in modernity, built around the fact/value split. Booth’s analysis exactly fit the patterns we found in the use of the Bible within the academy and the church, that is, they displayed a vast gulf between the activities of “critical description” and “capricious faith.”

In response to the fact/value split, Booth called for a “rhetoric of assent,” his own retrieval of the premodern practice of rhetoric. The rhetoric of assent is intended to move the essence of critical intellectual inquiry beyond the practices of systemic doubt established by Descartes and Hume. Taking aim directly at the thought and life of one of the reigning philosophers of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell, Booth demonstrated how Russell’s adoption of the rhetoric of systemic doubt and the other contours of the modern dogma led Russell to incoherence, immoral, and failed leadership as a public intellectual.

Stephen Toulmin, a student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, had already developed his own itinerary for what, in his most popular work, Cosmopolis,20 he terms “rhetorical rationality.” Toulmin had explored modern human understanding and discovered some of the same patterns at which Booth had taken aim. However, Toulmin deepened Booth’s analysis and response to the modern condition by exploring, in ever wider and deeper circles, the historical and cultural devel-
opments that brought about the modern dogma and effective ways of arguing or engaging in discourse that made possible sustained public understanding and truth seeking. His exploration of the use of the practical syllogism and the ancient tradition of casuistry has profoundly influenced our exploration of the place of the Bible in both the academy and the church.

Most importantly, Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology of the will, employed within the framework of a rhetorical rationality, has shaped our understanding of the actual interpretation of the Bible in academy and church, funding our sustained work toward innovating new theories of interpretation and truth. Ricoeur's dedication to engaging the greatest a prioria of modernity and, at the same time, investigating common practices of biblical interpretation, an investigation he has undertaken with great patience, subtlety, and complexity, has literally made such innovation possible.

Donald's own work on the Gospel of Mark became a shared task in our invention of new theories of interpretation and the truth of the Bible. Beginning with his dissertation, *Messiah and Temple*, he had sought to move beyond the impulse of the historical-critical method to dissect the text in order to seek its truth. Initially, he sought to understand the whole of Mark using the then adventurous work of redaction criticism, especially the work of Willi Marxsen. At the same time, he wanted to engage the historical work of his teacher Nils Dahl on the crucifixion. In terms of our joint work, he often said that he sought to understand the book of Mark as a whole without losing its historical referentiality.

In seeking to keep together our engagement with both the Bible as a whole and its referentiality, we sought to move beyond the fact/value split, especially beyond the modern habit of reducing truth to historical fact, a move that relegates theological meaning and significance to the category of a capricious enterprise.

Ricoeur's careful phenomenology of time and narrative furthered this enterprise. His multifaceted descriptive phenomenology made visible the interaction of emplotment, narrative, and diverse forms of temporality that uncovered the rhetorical character of historical consciousness. The space between fact and value, once considered by modern scholars an infinite crevice, becomes in his analysis a multifaceted set of relationships, rendering the split obsolete, indeed, silly. In place of reductive schemes of referentiality, we began to see multiple referentiality and polyvalence as the most intellectually persuasive and morally adequate approach to the interpretation of the Bible in the academy and the church as a whole. The use of a rhetorical rationality helped us move, in Richard Bernstein's terms, "beyond objectivism and relativism," and established a rich intellectual and teaching agenda.

**RESHAPING THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS AND REINVENTING TEACHING PRACTICES**

The congregational or intellectual leader's capacity to innovate in using rhetorical rationality with the Bible in public discourse must be shaped first by developing
seminarians' practices in using the Bible in classes that focus on other subject matters besides the Bible itself. We believed that the paradigm for the use of the Bible in classes could be changed by two major shifts in the way we approached the Bible: first, providing students and faculty with practice using the Bible to provide rhetorical warrants and backing for one's position, not just data in a practical syllogism; and second, reshaping our practice of inquiry to consider God as first and always an agent, not simply a subject matter, in the educational process.33

This twofold shift led us to teaching interdisciplinary courses that focused on different subject matters but always used the Bible in the work of the class. However, we wanted to explore this intellectual and teaching agenda in the real world of theological education as a whole. We wrote a proposal to Craig Dykstra34 at the Lilly Endowment that led to a grant to Luther Seminary. Along with our colleague in practical theology, Roland Martinson, we functioned as the research and development team for the creation of a curriculum that took this double-premised rhetorical approach to the engagement with the Bible in theological education quite seriously.

Firstly, the rhetorical approach became a critical ingredient in the interpretation of texts in the entire curriculum. We moved beyond studying the Bible rhetorically throughout the curriculum to studying other classic texts of the Lutheran tradition, the ecumenical creeds, and sixteenth-century confessions. Similarly, classes based upon continuing living practices of the church, such as worship, integrated a rhetorical approach35 and were themselves integrated into the traditional "text study" courses.

Secondly, we and our colleagues at Luther Seminary literally structured a new division of the curriculum on the rhetorical rationality approach, which we called "interpreting and confessing." Each student, whatever his or her degree plan, must take required courses that teach rhetorical rationality in each year that the student is resident.36 The courses focus upon the mediating human faculties of practical reasoning (phronesis) and creative, productive activity (poesis) gathered together as Christian wisdom and witness.

Thirdly, the rhetorical approach required situational reflection as a central learning activity in the new curriculum. Certain courses and times in the student's journey were taken as critical moments for helping students move beyond the modern dogma to practicing leadership out of Christian wisdom and witness. This move to situational reflection pressed a more integrated connection between personal student formation and formation as public leader. It called also for a move from the modernist construction of text and context, theory and applied theory (the dominant models of contextual education) to a more situationalist understanding of learning.

Fourthly, the rhetorical approach continues to serve as the vision and guiding principle in our practices for creating, introducing, and critiquing courses Luther Seminary offers, resulting in two major overhauls in the curriculum in the past decade.

As Donald moved to Princeton, our project and our conversation partners
broadened and became more diverse. With the generous assistance of the Lilly Endowment, we were able to involve a number of colleagues from other schools of theology in conversation and critique of our rhetorical approach. This conversation over the last decade has involved scholars, administrators, and teachers from all the disciplines within contemporary schools of theology.

This conversation, which has continued under the name “The Bible and Theological Education,” has been furthered by the conversations of a steering committee and three project teams. The first team, whose initial study volume was completed first, explored the nature of the study of theology within the rubric of rhetorical rationality. Their work has uncovered the profoundly important role of rhetorical rationality in the preparation and practices of Christian leaders in the first four centuries of the church. Indeed, these researchers have concluded that unless we view their work with an understanding of rhetorical practice, our understanding of their vision and practices is greatly flattened and diminished. Using a rhetorical approach, this team also examined how moral and doctrinal questions have been examined throughout the history of the church. Among other things, we have learned how profound are the differences in how we now understand the basic teachings of the Trinity when we start with a rhetorical approach.

A second team in this conversation has focused on the use of the rhetorical approach within the classroom. Interdisciplinary teams of faculty have attempted to rethink their classes using a rhetorical imagination, considering how rhetorical rationality might affect the structure of the curriculum as a whole as well as the character of the classroom itself, and outlining how they might deploy learning activities appropriate to teach these necessary capacities of Christian leadership. Much of the group’s time has been spent reviewing these proposed courses created by teams from the various schools of theology.

**RHETORIC AND THE BIBLE: FOR OR AGAINST TRUTH?**

Within the conversation we have sustained about the Bible and theological education, we have encountered both surface concerns and deeper doubts and questions about the limits of rhetorical rationality and the potential flaws in a rhetorical approach to theological education. The third team in the Bible and Theological Education project, long anticipated but only recently formed, is composed of philosophers, theologians, and Bible scholars, who want to respond to both ancient and modern suspicion that rhetoric is too often employed as a way to avoid or confuse questions of truth.

The Truth and the Bible team took on the question of truth directly. The team deliberately put philosophers, theologians, and biblical scholars together with the express purpose of exploring the question of truth from the point of view of these philosophical questions in such a way as they could serve our goal of deepening the study and use of the Bible in classroom and local congregation.
Our study team gathered philosophers from across the spectrum of theories of truth. Some philosophers proposed that we should update the traditional correspondence theory of truth, the one assumed in most common conversation.44 Others wanted to revise and apply a coherence model of truth; two of us followed Ricoeur’s work in a conversation with an Anglo-American linguistic turn.45 Finally, some members of the group proposed further development of the American pragmatist theory of truth as a vehicle for the church to consider in the use of the Bible in education and moral conversation.46

Despite their diverse perspectives on what constitutes the most adequate theories of truth, all members of this team have participated in the study of the Bible and reflected upon their proposals in light of their actual reading of the Bible. Philosophers and theologians have sought to interpret the Bible, both in the presence of biblical scholars and also in partnership with these scholars, all in the service of the use of the Bible in classroom and congregation.

Michael Welker represented one of the most deeply held convictions of this study team best when he pressed for the continued vocation of the church as a truth-seeking community.47 As he so well articulated it, for the church to forsake this vocation is for the church to forsake a core characteristic of its identity and to threaten its own missional character.48

WHAT IS AT STAKE—THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

On the surface, most Christians would not question that the church has a vocation as a truth-seeking community. Of course, the church seeks truth—after all, Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). However, these same Christians continue to imagine the search for truth within these troubling conditions of modernity that profoundly threaten the life of the church and the civil community.

Indeed, they are not alone. Despite the cul-de-sac created by the modern dogma that Booth and others have made visible, many public intellectuals are calling for a return to the dead hand of the modern project. Nowhere is this reactionary proposal more fierce (and more significant) than in the conversation resulting from the contemporary ideological conflicts throughout the world, which for some scholars goes by the rubric “the clash of civilizations.”49

Faced with a resurgence of increasingly vocal religious communities throughout the world, including within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, these reactionary modernists are proposing the same solutions that have proven only half successful. Specifically, they propose that public communities should cordon off values, especially religious values, into the private space and recreate (or preserve) a value-free public space, where moral and practical decisions are made based only on “objective facts.”

An inherent consequence—indeed, a hoped-for consequence of these proposals of reaction—would be that religious and moral communities would lose
their place in the shaping of civil moral life. Religions would be required to for-
sake making truth claims, at least in public, thus avoiding irrational and unnec-
essary conflict, and to confine their activities to their own private spaces. Even
some of the most subtle interpreters of modernity have been lulled into the belief
that public civilization must necessarily be limited to matters of economic and
political life and that religion functions only as a nurturing, safe, private home
for people to escape the travails of the public world on occasion. These inter-
preters fail to see the dangers to civil life should their view become dominant and
faith communities cease to be public meeting places, bridges between the private
and public dimensions of our lives.50

One example of this sort of reactionary proposal is Jonathan Rauch’s recent
piece in The Atlantic. Rauch delights in a particular form of secular tolerance he
calls “apatheism," which is built on his own experience that “it has been years
since I really cared one way or another” about religion. He suggests that “apathe-
ism—a disinclination to care at all that much about one’s own religion, and an even
stronger disinclination to care about other people’s . . . is worth getting excited
about.”51 He praises his Christian and Jewish friends who “organize their lives
around an intense and personal relationship with God, but who betray no sign
of caring that I am an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual. They are exponents,
at least, of the second, more important part of apatheism: the part that
doesn’t mind what other people think about God.”52 Rauch cites with enthusi-
asm the opinion of philosopher Richard Rorty that “a world of pragmatic athe-
ists would be a better, happier world than our present one.” Rauch, however,
prefers apatheism to pragmatic atheism, clearly believing that both are “prefer-
able to fanatical religiosity (al Qaeda) and tyrannical secularism (China).”53

History has shown, however, that a retreat by persons of faith from making
public truth claims will not empty the public square of values but fill it with the
very fundamentalists modernists like Rauch fear most. If persons of faith who
seek truth forsake the faith-based public practice of making truth claims, only
those who disdain the careful search for truth and instead offer only “capricious
faith” will enter the public space. In such a system, tolerance will become repres-
sive rather than engendering of civil discourse.

More ironically, a public space emptied of persons of faith searching for truth
is the best place for fanaticism to flourish. Perhaps no better current example
comes to mind than the truncated public conversation from both secular and
religious intellectual communities in responding to Sayyid Qutb, Al Qaeda’s
favorite philosopher. Qutb, a martyr under the Nasser regime in Egypt, gathered
an audience of young men who, like himself, were raised in traditional Muslim
communities and educated in Europe and the United States.54 These are not the
poor or ill-educated of the Muslim world; quite the contrary, they are represen-
tatives of a growing upper middle class Islamic culture.

Yet this audience is profoundly disturbed by what they observe in contempo-
rary Western culture. They perceive the same dysfunctional divide between fact
and values and spirit and body that make up the modern dogma. Some, like
Qutb, return to their religious tradition, especially the Koran, to analyze modern Christendom, and they have gathered an audience. Paul Berman suggests that Qutb’s most influential works, extended commentaries upon the Koran, have not attracted the public attention of American public intellectuals that they merit. According to Paul Berman, Qutb’s analysis was soulful and heartfelt. It was a theological analysis, but in its cultural emphases, it reflected the style of 20th-century philosophy. The analysis asked some genuinely perplexing questions—about the division between mind and body in Western thought; about the difficulties in striking a balance between sensual experience and spiritual elevation; about the impersonality of modern power and technological innovation; about social injustice. But, though Qutb plainly followed some main trends of 20th-century Western social criticism and philosophy, he poured his ideas through a filter of Koranic commentary, and the filter gave his commentary a grainy new texture, authentically Muslim, which allowed him to make a series of points that no Western thinker was likely to propose.55

Berman sees persuasive power in such commentaries. He notes how Qutb makes truth claims on the basis of the Koran, truth claims that clearly convince intelligent and technologically sophisticated Muslims of the life and death character of his interpretation. He underlines the power of rendering public such truth claims about a religious text, the Koran, for the contemporary Muslim world but also for the contemporary secular and religious American public intellectual who would be a world citizen. Failing to respond to Qutb’s truth claims with a full, rich, religious, and secular public conversation threatens civil community.

He also notes how dangerous and ill-advised it would be to have Western politicians meddling in a discussion of these sacred matters. Indeed, to have our politicians take up this response would both obviate the hard-won successes of uncoupling religious practice from state sanctions and limit the diversity of secular and religious responses to such challenges to Western democratic society and culture. Instead, Berman asks, “Who will speak of the sacred and the secular, of the physical world and the spiritual world? Who will defend liberal ideas against the enemies of liberal ideas?” He answers, “Philosophers and religious leaders will have to do this on their own. Are they doing so? Armies are in motion, but are the philosophers and religious leaders, the liberal thinkers, likewise in motion?”56 Berman sees that when religious leaders and philosophers take up the apatheism proposed by Jonathan Rauch, we leave the civil space to those who advocate terrorism.

CONGREGATIONAL MORAL CONVERSATION AND TRUTH SEEKING

Of course, there are varied publics to which Christians need to make the truth claims within civil space. If we are to learn something useful from the challenge
of Sayyid Qutb, for example, we need to make those claims through extended and thoughtful commentary on the Bible in conversation with Islam and its holy book.

At a bare minimum, we need to forsake the modernist habit of interpreting the Bible only for the faithful or reducing our notion of the “public” interpretation of the Bible to historical studies. Instead, we must imagine commentaries on the Bible, or parts of the Bible, aimed to teach, delight, even persuade diverse audiences. Regular commentary on the Bible in relation to contemporary topics and issues would better serve the civil space, especially if they were written by persons highly competent in the topic under discussion and thoughtfully aware of a critical understanding of the Bible.

Of course, this is not likely if we take seriously Rauch’s observations that “even regular churchgoers can, and often do, rank quite high on the atheism scale.”57 He refers to these happy Christian communities as the “softer denominations” who are “packed with apathists.”58 Although he does not want to identify them, I would suspect those he praises are the same mainline denominations that are in decline, for, as he notes, “there are a lot of reasons to attend religious services: to connect with a culture or a community, to socialize, to expose children to religions, to find the warming comfort of familiar ritual.”59 Notice that his reasons for attending religious services fall far short of seeking truth and justice, beauty and peace.

In Rauch’s mind, as in the view of many thinkers hearkening for a return to modernism, the only alternative to these apathetic denominations is fundamentalism. In Rauch’s understanding, religion is “the most divisive and volatile of social forces. To be in the grip of religious zeal is the natural state of human beings, or at least of a great many human beings; that is how much of the species seems to be wired”—a decidedly reductionistic, yet quite common view.

In response to these reactive turns, Donald Juel and I tried with our colleagues to imagine and work out a practice for a very different Christian community that could thrive between the extremes of apatheism and religious zeal, a community capable of considered, intense, conflicted truth seeking within itself and in conversation with its neighbors.60 Such a community must move beyond either a propositional or even a narrative approach to the Bible into a rhetorical practice of truth seeking. Although the narrative approach profoundly influences our reflection on the Bible in theological education, its focus upon only one genre of the Bible and its inattention to the questions of ethos, logos, and pathos in diverse publics make it relatively inadequate when compared to the rhetorical approach. Indeed, the finest practitioners of the narrative approach often end up moving beyond simply telling the Christian story to engaging in all the classical rhetorical inventions we call for in our proposal.

In diverse face-to-face communities, from the academy to the local congregation, from Alaska to Texas to South Africa, we have sought to engender and regularly practice the rhetorical innovations that take seriously how human beings seem “wired” and how difficult it is to form civil space where moral and religious
wisdom can find a place. Drawing on critical social theory, our colleague Gary Simpson calls these congregations “prophetic public companions.”

Happily, such communities do exist, even among congregations. They approach the Bible more as beggars than soldiers in search of ammunition; they risk the pain of disagreement, even conflict, rather than smothering conversation in pious syrup. They desire to seek truth with others and witness to the truth they find, rather than simply repeating the Christian story to themselves while waiting for others to be attracted to it. Their continued work of seeking the truth in an increasingly diverse and dangerous world is a cutting edge of contemporary theological education. Their practices of using the Bible are opening new opportunities for theological education. They are the primal location of such education, and our schools of theology would do well to learn from them.

Notes
7. A denominational consultation of over twenty organizations with processes and products designed to help congregations attend to morally disputed topics showed a “Bible bullets” type pattern; all but one was designed around the advocacy format.
10. Donald and I taught a course entitled “Truth and Meaning: Uses of the Bible”
for fourteen years, and both of us continued teaching the course when he moved to Princeton Seminary. I was joined by two colleagues, Sarah Henrichs and James Boyce; with them I studied Galatians rather than Mark.


12. Interestingly enough, in my experience, former lawyers proved the exception to this general rule. My hypothesis is that they have received training and practice in one of the few intellectual disciplines where rhetorical rationality has survived the Enlightenment.

13. The irony that a position that puts such a strong focus upon connecting with the audience should have a crisis in public relations simply is too delicious. We could not pass up the use of this "offensive" term to press our case. Other terms, while less offensive to modern ears, only serve to reinforce the dominant paradigm about public discourse. The irritation is itself part of the argument.


15. Stephen Toulmin’s layout of an argument consists of six elements. The first element is the claim. The claim of the argument is the conclusion that someone is trying to justify in the argument. The second element is the grounds. The grounds of an argument are the facts on which the argument is based. The third element of the argument is the warrant. The warrant of the argument assesses whether or not the claim is legitimate based on the grounds. The fourth element is the backing. The backing of the argument gives additional support for a warrant by answering different questions. The modal qualifier is the fifth element of the argument. The modal qualifier indicates the strength of the leap from the data to the warrant. The sixth and final element of the argument is the rebuttal. The rebuttal occurs when the leap from grounds to claim does not appear to be legitimate. See Toulmin, The Uses of Argument (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).


25. Ricoeur and Toulmin offered a seminar in which each took his own tradition of thought (Anglo-American and Continental) and reflected on the same topics (e.g., practice and action).


29. My own dissertation had argued that a relatively adequate theory of interpretation understood the text as a whole without losing a full range of referentiality. Of course, part of this full range included historical references. Patrick R. Keifert, "Meaning and Reference: The Interpretation of Verisimilitude in the Gospel according to Mark," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1982).

30. One cannot here employ the phrase "meaning and significance" in relationship to this time period without recognizing that this desire was directed at the work of Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967) and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).


34. Our debt to Craig Dykstra and James Wind and the Lilly Endowment goes well beyond the Endowment's financial support to include their genuine interest, engagement, critique, and trust in our enterprise.


36. Such courses include "Reading the Audiences" (a first-year required course in the practices of understanding the immediate environment of a congregation, its demographics, psychographics, cultures, and social systems), "Worship," "Exercises in Biblical Theology" (a senior course using case studies from the students' internships in congregations during the previous year—a requirement in Lutheran seminary education), and a series of electives generated by teams of faculty drawn from diverse disciplines around shared neuralgic themes, such as "God, Evil, and Suffering," taught by a systematician and Old Testament scholar; "Creation and Environment," taught by a Bible scholar and an ethicist specializing in agronomy and sustainable agriculture; "Law and Justice," taught by a Bible scholar and professor of law; "Paul, Power, and Politics," taught by a New Testament scholar and systematics professor; and "Truth and Meaning: Uses of the Biblical Narrative," focusing on either Mark or Galatians and taught by a New Testament scholar and systematician.

37. This committee includes David L. Bartlett, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Richard B. Hays, Stephen J. Kratchchick, Dennis T. Olson, Alan Padgett, Donald Juel,† and myself.

38. This team includes A. K. M. Adam, Wesley Avram, James Boyce, Donald

†Deceased


40. This team included A. K. M. Adam, James Boyce, Ellen T. Charry, Sarah Henrichs, Stephen J. Krafcich, Dennis T. Olson, Marianne Meye Thompson, John Thompson, and Miroslav Volf.

41. Perkins School of Theology, Azusa Pacific University, Candler School of Theology, Duke Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, St. Paul Seminary at the University of St. Thomas, Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Gettysburg, and Luther Seminary.

42. This team includes David L. Bartlett, Ellen T. Charry, Stephen T. Davis, Dennis T. Olson, Alan Padgett, Marianne Meye Thompson, Mark Wallace, Nicholas Woltersdorff, Donald Juel, and myself.

43. This team includes Alan Padgett, Marianne Meye Thompson, Steven Davies, Nicholas Woltersdorff, Mark Wallace, David Bartlett, Donald Juel, Ellen T. Charry, Michael Welker, and myself.


45. Mark Wallace and myself.

46. Perhaps the most clear source of this approach is the work of the Chicago pragmatists, especially John Dewey, and the Aristotelian pragmatists Richard McKeeon and Wayne C. Booth.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.


55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Rauch, "Let It Be," 34.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Members of the Congregational Studies Research Team at Church Innovations Institute are: Ann Hill Duin, Ronald W. Duty, Patricia Taylor Ellison, David Frederickson, Nancy Hess, Donald Juel, Cynthia Ann Jurisson, Craig J. Lewis, Mark MacDonald, Anne Marie Neuchterlein, Jose David Rodriguez, Gary Simpson, David Stark, Arlynne Turnquist, and myself; in addition, the following are guests of the team: Mary Ann Zimmer, C. Kirk Hadaway, Lois Y. Barrett, Anita L. Bradshaw, Jonathan Case, Nathan Frambah, Scott Frederickson, Gail Riina, Michael Welker.


64. Recognizing congregations as the primal location of theological education remains one of the greatest opportunities for theological education in a post-Christendom North America.