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Introduction

"We are waiting not for Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."[1]

With these words Alasdair MacIntyre concluded his text, *After Virtue*, in which he exposed the self-destructive nature of the Enlightenment and noted its climax in the modern moral condition as "one characterized by moral incoherence and unsettlable moral disputes." This final phrase in *After Virtue* is intended to draw a parallel in the minds of his readers. Just as St. Benedict and monastic communities emerged onto the ecclesial scene in the sixth century, at the "epoch in which the Roman Empire declined into the Dark Ages," and refused to identify "civility and moral community with the maintenance of the [Roman] imperium," now too, new communities must emerge to sustain civility and the intellectual and moral life through the "dark ages which are already upon us."[2]

MacIntyre wrote that phrase in 1981, and many of his readers either hoped his assessment of the modern moral condition was wrong, or that the insurgence of postmodernism could provide the needed framework for the development of character and the virtuous life. And yet for many Christians here we are, 36 years later, waiting for another St. Benedict; still looking for the types of communities that can counter the moral formation of cultural liturgies of our time—from consumerism to individualism.

I am guessing I do not need to give examples of the current state of our civil discourse or describe the entities and mediums that shape our desires and habits today. As connected as our contemporary lives are, we exhibit what Robert Putnam has called "broad social disengagement."[3] Persons today are likely to have only a tenuous connection with the type of community that forms character and virtue. And there is a good chance that community is *not* the church.

The Task of a Seminary (at this juncture):

A seminary sits squarely at the intersection of the church and the academy. The spectrum represents everything from the abstract, theoretical, or critical-scientific approaches to religion to its antithesis: disillusionment with education and anti-intellectualism.

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 263.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

A seminary resists both ends of this spectrum, and finds its place in the beautiful, tension-filled, milieu where the church and the academy come together. Intersections are fairly complex places, and are often messy and represent the confluence of multiple entities attempting to go different places through the same square footage. Inevitably bad collisions happen, whether because of recklessness or sheer honest oversight. But good collisions happen too: the unexpected meeting of an old friend, a new acquaintance, the cross-pollination of cultures and perspectives.

But "intersection" is really an inadequate term. The "place" where the church and the academy come together is an alternate space. A seminary does not represent a simple synthesis between the church and the academy; its place is not simply the meeting point of two ends of a spectrum, nor does it exist merely to arbitrate or referee between two sides of a binary. A seminary is not a traffic signal.

A seminary collapses the binaries. It refuses to pay attention to a two-fold typology and presents a third-way beyond the linear plane of the church and academy spectrum. This is the beautiful, tension-filled milieu where a seminary resides. And I would argue that as much as ever, it needs to do so willfully, intentionally, and with a commitment to live amidst the cacophony that occurs when the typology is broken; when the binaries are collapsed.

Now add to this alternate space—this third way—the rapidly changing environments in which the church and the academy find themselves. And the key word here is *rapidly*. For example, just as the church in North America was coming to grips with the rise of secularism and the decline of religion in the public sphere, it is discovered that North America seems to have—at least in some ways—bypassed secularism for postsecularism.

As Elaine Graham states, "Against many expectations, religion has not vanished from view. Indeed, it appears to be more influential and prominent than ever; and yet this new currency is often clouded by widespread apprehension and misunderstanding."[4] In other words, the postsecular intrigue about religion is *not* revival, but instead "a cosmopolitan celebration of religious visibility and diversity […] that includes atheism as a belief system as well."[5]

Indeed, it has become commonplace to talk about significant shifts impacting both the academy and the church.

In one sense these shifts are nothing new, and it would be a stretch to claim the shifts are unprecedented in human history. Many, however, claim that these shifts are at least unprecedented in *recent* human history. They are compelled by arguments such as Phyllis Tickle's *The Great Emergence* which likens today to one of the great rummage sales of the

[4] Elaine Graham, *Apology without Apologetics*: *Speaking of God in a World Troubled by Religion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 1.
[5] Ibid., 4. Quoting Possamai and Lee, "Religion in Science Fiction Narratives: A Case of Multiple Modernities." In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, edited by Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 205-17. (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

church which occurs about every 500 years. In other words, for Tickle, we are facing the most significant shift since the Protestant Reformation. As I speak now, it is almost 500 years to the day when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg cathedral door!

So whether we use the terms postmodernism, hypermodernism, post-Christianity, post-Christendom, secular or postsecular—or some amalgamation of the above—few deny that the shifts are paradigmatic. Christianity (and North American Christianity in particular) is so deeply entrenched within modernity that these shifts not only mean unstable ground, but a withering of any construct of Christianity whose roots are shallower than the plows blade.

I may be overstretching the analogy, but turning over the soil breeds new life. Not without some work, Not without some loss. Whether or not these shifts are God ordained, the question for us is the same: do we trust the Master Gardener?

As a result of the shifting landscape, both the church and the academy are having to rediscover themselves in a new era. And right in the middle of it are seminaries; ecclesial-based graduate schools of theology whose primary task is a practical-theological one which Craig Dykstrya would identify as being, "to nourish, nurture, discipline, and resource both pastoral and ecclesial imagination."[6]

To put it very succinctly, the task of a seminary is to help the church be the church.

Dykstra's statement highlights the seminary as the locus—a formative community—for faithful embodiments and expressions of the church and ministry. An entire essay could be devoted to unpacking Dykstra's statement, but I simply want to highlight his use of the word "imagination." The word bears a twofold meaning:

- Firstly, it most definitely elicits notions of creativity and newness. In other words, to nourish, nurture, discipline, and resource new *possibilities* and *paradigms* of pastoral and ecclesial life. This meaning of the word imagination I will return to shortly.

- Secondly, Dykstra's use of the word imagination refers to worldview, in a theological and sociological sense. For Dykstra, a pastoral and ecclesial imagination entails a way of seeing and understanding the world—God's world. That type of imagination only comes through a set of socially and historically embodied practices that form the way in which the world is interpreted and practices are engaged.

[6] Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination." In Dorothy C. Bass and Craig R. Dykstra. *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 43.

- As William Willimon once stated, "to be Christian is to learn to see the world in a certain way, until day by day, I become as I see."[7] The task of theological education is to help persons see the world in a certain way and to teach them how to bring leadership to Christian communities so that others may also "learn to see the world in certain way."

At the heart of seminary education, then, is an emphasis on the construction of *habitus* and disposition engendered by the lived practices, rhythms, and relationships that exist at the confluence of theological exploration and ecclesial life.[8] The task of a seminary is never mere acquisition of knowledge or ascent to specific theological 'principles', but critical reflection *on* and appropriation *of* Christian practices, performances, and beliefs in light of the lived reality of the church and God's unfolding mission in the world.

So far so good. I am guessing everyone likes the sound of this. It is an incredibly monastic description of a seminary; the seminary as abbey (but we'll have to think about our cottage industry at NTS; it wouldn't be alcohol). Without getting too distracted by this tangent, let me say my suspicion is that the abbey will become an increasingly intriguing model for seminaries to recover. Granted, it will be a "doubtless different" kind of abbey, replete with digital learning platforms, synchronous and asynchronous interaction, and all sorts of other technological possibilities we can't yet fathom. Even still, its architype will be an abbey: an intentional community for the formation and proliferation of Christian virtue and practical wisdom.

Returning now to the first meaning of the word imagination: the notions of creativity, newness, and possibility. In order for a seminary to fulfill its task (vocation) to nourish, nurture, discipline, and resource the pastoral and ecclesial imagination, a seminary must be able to discern, articulate, and model a posture of faithful response to God's activity in the world.

It begins with recognizing 'what God is up to'. And for many of us, including myself, the first step includes releasing my preconceptions and prehensions of church and ministry, particularly those that are clear constructs of the modern era, and then opening myself to the unfathomable imagination of God.

In other words, a seminary is called to help the church bear witness to the imagination of God. To help the church be the church.

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[7] William Willimon, *The Service of God: Christian Work and Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 35.

[8] Edward Farley's call for a recovery of *theologia* is exemplary of this concern. His use of *habitus* echoes that of Pierre Bourdieu and Thomas Aquinas. See *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

Participating in the Theo-Drama:

I first encountered Matthias Grunewald's painting from the crucifixion panel on the Isenheim Altar as an NTS student in an honors reading course with Dr. Tom Noble. I was reading about Karl Barth, a significant twentieth century theologian, who had discovered Matthias Grunewald's painting in 1918. As a pastor at the time, Barth was enthralled with its portrayal of John the Baptist and found it to be an appropriate representation of the task of preaching—to point to the crucified Christ. Throughout Barth's entire career, first as pastor and then theologian, he kept a copy of Grunewald's crucifixion scene above his desk. Barth referred to Grunewald's crucifixion over fifty-one times in his writings.[9]

For Barth, the painting more broadly highlights the task of Christian witness. John the Baptist's elongated finger points away from himself and toward Christ—a particularly vivid image of Christ—who is emaciated and empty.

Speaking to the World Council of Churches in 1948 (30 years later), Barth states that the church consists of "the gathering together (*congregatio*) of those men and women (*fidelium*) whom the Lord Jesus Christ chooses and calls to be witnesses of the victory he has already won, and heralds of its future manifestation."[10]

While the church is 'the body of Christ', in a paradoxical way, Grunewald's John the Baptist is also an image of the church; the faithful who are called to be witnesses. Christ is the *autobasileia*—the very embodiment of the kingdom—whose "victory is won" and continues in "future manifestation."

The task of the church, then, is to point to the work of God in Christ, which is ongoing. Undoubtedly for Barth, victory is won in Christ and salvation has come—his Chistocentrism leaves him no other option—but the story does not end there. The church is a herald—a sign and proclaimer—of the ongoing work of God in Christ and its future manifestation. As Joseph Mangina notes, for Barth "the church is constituted by Christ's every-new action."[11]

In a similar vein, Barth talked about the church as 'event'—"the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ."[12] *Event* describes how the church is constituted by Christ's activity through the power of the Spirit. The church "happens" or "takes place," not by human construction, but by the movement of God in a particular time and place.

The Lukan story of the walk to Emmaus is instructive. The passage is often read with a focus on the two disciples who recognize Christ when the bread is broken, but Barth argues we have it backwards. The point is not that Jesus is *recognized*, but *makes himself know* by his activity

[9] William Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 5.
[10] Alister McGrath, *Theology: The Basics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 150.
[11] Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 155.
[12] Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, 661.

through the power of the Spirit. It was Jesus who "took the break, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them…They told what had happened on the road, how *he had been made known* to them in the breaking of the bread."[13]

In other words, the church is the miraculous and unexpected creation of the Spirit.[14] It is not our own doing, it is not planned or produced, but the opposite. The church *happens*, it surprises us as it breaks into history ever anew as Christ's body.

In similar fashion, Hans Urs von Balthasar suggested understanding human and cosmic reality as divine drama involving both Creator and creation.[15] As in any drama, there are characters and scenes, plot lines and climaxes; and participants in the drama who respond to one another. Accordingly, Balthasar understands the relations between God, world, and the church to function as something like a play. Much like live theatre, participants are influenced by the energy and emotion of other participants. But unlike the theater, this play is not entirely scripted. In the theo-drama, elements of the story have been revealed, but much of the story is still unfolding.

At first, Balthasar's description of the theo-drama is unsettling. It proposes a dynamic constitution of the church akin to Karl Barth's suggestion of the church as "event." And let's face it, at the end of the day, how many of us are willing to admit that what constitutes the church is out of our hands.

And yet…church happens, by the power of the Spirit!

We train students in orthodoxy and orthopraxy, yet the greatest heresy of all may be the stifling of the Spirit.

Balthasar's theo-drama functions like a meta-narrative—a grand story—but one that is unfinished. The church, then, journeys through history as a *pilgrim people* discovering itself in an ongoing and open-ended "dramatic struggle."[16] While Balthasar's theodramatic theology may be unsettling, it also has much to offer a seminary preparing ministers to navigate the complex intersections of the church and world.

First, it is a reminder that for a seminary to testify to the imagination of God, and partner with God's work in the world, theological education must point beyond ministerial and ecclesial blueprints.

- This is generally not the predisposition of educational or ecclesial institutions. Blueprints and formulas are teachable, trainable, and replicable; and theologically it enables

[13] Luke 24: 30, 35. NRSV.
[14] Mangina, 155.
[15] Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Five Volumes (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998). See especially Vol. II, 96; Vol. V, 22.
[16] Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57ff.

academics to talk about the church in abstraction, as an ideal. But God's revelation does not occur in abstraction, but in contexts (plural) that shape the movements of the play/drama, even if the fundamental nature of God's revelation does not change.

- I often say that NTS prepares ministers for the present *and* future church. But we know that we are only able to do this if we can look beyond the ministerial and ecclesial blueprints of narrowed contexts—past, regional, or inherited contexts—and discover the church afresh as it "struggles" (wrestles with, dialogues with, relates to) the various movements of God's play.

Second, and more importantly, a theodramatic theology is a reminder to live faithfully in confidence that *this is God's story*. The church is 'called out' to play a particular role in the drama. Like Grunewald's image of John the Baptist pointing his finger toward Christ, the role of the church is to witness (point) to the every-new revelation of God in the world.

This is, indeed, the very meaning of "good news." In Christ "victory is won" and all history is swallowed up—past, present, and future. The Christ "event" penetrates, infiltrates, all of history. The story belongs to God! This is God's drama!

We Are Not *Waiting:*

Across the church catholic, a number of Christians and Christian communities have heeded MacIntyre's call for another, albeit very different, St. Benedict. In the context of North America, for example, the new monasticism movement—largely protestant, intentional communities reflective of free-church eccleisologies but with contemporary monastic vows—have been unabashed about their call to provide new communities of formation in the face of the hegemonic powers of consumerism and nationalism. But, of course, MacIntyre's call is somewhat superfluous. Such communities have existed throughout Christian history, and continue to be present in various contexts and capacities today.

The church has been in the business of intellectual and moral formation for a long time, even if Benedictine monasticism represents one of the clearest examples of ecclesial formation of virtue.

So I—or dare I say, we—are convinced that we *need not wait*. As inheritors of the Wesleyan-holiness tradition, or more appropriately the Wesleyan-holiness *movement*, we have a rich history of virtue formation and ecclesial innovation.

It finds its roots in Wesley and the people called Methodists, whose vision for personal and ecclesial renewal spurred the development of a new form of intentional community (the society) set on discipling persons into the particular moral and intellectual commitments of the Christian life. The movement begins in the context of the long eighteenth century amidst the influence and changes of English Christendom and British empiricism. Again, it would be a stretch to say today's rapidly changing environments are unprecedented.

At the heart of the movement is the call to holiness of heart and life. And for Wesley and the inheritors of the movement (i.e., us), that call was always less about intellectual assent to a set of propositions and more about the development of virtue through *habitus*—the transformation (re-formation) of tempers and affections through the reordering of practice so that Christians may embody dispositions consistent with what Wesley calls the "marks of new birth."

So…we are not waiting!

Instead we lean on a rich tradition that has, in its very DNA, an openness and responsiveness to the unfathomable imagination of God. The Methodist movement broke the ecclesial and ministerial blueprints of its time and became, as Outler suggests, "an evangelical order within a regional division of the Church catholic,"[17] or as Colin Williams states, "*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*—small groups of believers living under the Word and seeking under the life of discipline to be a leaven of holiness within the 'great congregation' of the baptized."[18]

It is in our DNA!

So at Nazarene Theological Seminary, we are not waiting, but moving forward in our task to nourish, nurture, discipline, and resource the pastoral and ecclesial imagination. Confident that God has called God's people for such a time as this.

We are not waiting…but embracing our task as faithful witnesses to the victory that is won, and there is no faithfulness and no witness in fear. We are called to stand confident in the power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the *autobasileia*, the kingdom come.

[17] Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 306.
[18] Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1960), 149.