

## **Theological Reflection**

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: II Corinthians 4:16-18

**The Holidays always put me in a reflective mood. In recent days I have been thinking a lot about my family, my spiritual community...all of you...as well as who I am theologically and spiritually. As I have reflected, certain areas of theological focus have become clear, which I share with you now, in the hopes that you may consider reflecting on your own spiritual growth. Much of what I will share you have heard before, but I find that each time I consider where I am spiritually, the context has a way of slightly changing my perspective.**

**I remember my last conversation with Elton Trueblood, two weeks before his death in 1994, I asked him about his book, *A Place To Stand*, which was written in 1967, and if his theology, that he shared in that book, had changed since he wrote it. His response, "Not at all!" As I left his presence that day, I remember thinking, in the**

words of a friend, "I wish I could be as sure about anything, as Elton is about everything!" Here are some of my reflections:

I think of myself as an *Experiential, Relational, Mystery Accepting, Journey and Justice Focused theologian*. Each of these words helps me to define how I have known God in my life.

*Spiritual Experience* is the touchstone of all that I believe. This is what keeps my faith vibrant and alive. I even developed an educational program that I called, "NET Groups," or *Nurturing Experience Theologically*, which was designed to help people understand that God can be found in every experience of life.

It was "Immediate Experience" that was the impetus for the Quaker mission of George Fox, and for 350 years Quakers have been experiential theologians, seeking a connection with the Inward Light through the medium of silence. It was William James who said, "If you are looking for a concrete example of religious experience, there can be no better one than is furnished by the

person of George Fox." As a Quaker, spiritual experience is the cornerstone of my theology.

Secondly, I consider myself a *Relational Theologian*, which simply means that I come to know God in my relationships with other persons. This is a very "Quakerly Statement." I believe, with all of you, that there is that of God in every person, or that within each of us there is an Inner Light or Light of Christ. In responding to the question, "What is the greatest commandment?," Jesus includes the love of our neighbors right along with the love of God. One of our Quaker Testimonies is Community. God is certainly beyond us, but God is most certainly within us, and as I interact with others my understanding of God is broadened and deepened. Thus, I am a relational theologian.

Third, and as difficult as it is to be, I am a *Mystery Accepting* theologian. Some of you may remember the hit television series, *The West Wing*. In one of the episodes the President's personal assistant was killed in a car accident. Following his assistant's memorial

service at the National Cathedral in Washington, the President asked to be alone. Operating out of the belief that God can control such things as car accidents, the President openly talked to God about his anger and how he felt let down by God for taking his friend and assistant out of this physical world. The scene concludes with the President lighting a cigarette and snuffing it out with his foot on the cathedral's altar.

Well Friends, like the President in *The West Wing*, all of us have tried to make sense out of God. We have all been disappointed when our understanding of God did not match the reality of a world where loved ones are taken from us, and where children die of hunger and war. Metaphorically speaking, I know about those times when I have snuffed out my own cigarette on the cathedral altar and walked away mad at God.

In recent years, however, and tempered by pain and chaos, I have come to a place in my theology where I can accept the mystery that surrounds my understanding of God. This doesn't mean that I have

lost my capacity to get angry with God. No. It only means that I have come to accept that God's ocean is so very big, and my net of understanding is so very small. Mystery is not something that I can try to explain, it is only something that I can accept, recognizing that it will always be impossible to fully understand.

Fourth, I consider myself a *Journey Theologian*. The foundational premise of journey theology is the belief that everything is in a state of flux, and everything is in the process of becoming. In my book *Sacred Chaos*, I quote the movie *Phenomenon* where John Travolta, who is dying of a brain tumor, makes the statement, "Everything is on its way somewhere." Journey theology has convinced me that we are all on a spiritual journey, and we are all at different places on this journey continuum. Regardless of where we are, I believe that God is interacting with us.

Finally, I consider myself a *Justice Focused* theologian. Throughout the Hebrew and Christian Testaments of Scripture, justice is a recurring theme. From my earliest times in my life, I can

remember the pursuit of justice to be a part of who my family was and who I have become. We were a family who took the Quaker Testimony on Equality seriously. My father's work on the Human Relations Commissions of Minneapolis, Muncie and Wichita, introduced me to the struggle for racial equality in America, and in my relationship with my wife, Elizabeth, I have been involved in justice issues surrounding this country's treatment of immigrants. I know that our country's history, a country that considers itself a Christian inspired country, is *not* one of equal justice for all. The way in which the belief in Manifest Destiny led to the wholesale killings of the First Americans, and the lasting effects of slavery, the original sin of America, continue to haunt us. There was the turning away from our shores of the ship St. Louis carrying Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, as well as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which have stained the words we find on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." There has been, from the beginning of time the fight for gender equality, as well as the fight for the rights of the LGBTQ

**community. And now brown people at our southern border, who are fleeing poverty and war in their own countries, are being treated unjustly because of the inability of Congress to work out a comprehensive, fair and just immigration policy. And I am afraid that the one they are negotiating now will not be fair and just. The truth is, we really don't mind immigrants, as long as they are willing to work for slave wages in the fields picking our fruits and vegetables, or if they join the Army to fight our wars for us.**

**Al Franken, the former senator from the state of Minnesota, tells the story of when he visited the injured soldiers from the Iraq War at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. In the first room he entered he encountered Johnny Rodriguez, a triple amputee, who was sitting up in his bed with a huge smile stretching across his face. As Senator Franken approached him, he said, "Johnny, why are you so happy?" The immigrant soldier, using the one hand he had left, held high a letter which he had just received, and responding to the Senator's question he said, "I am so very happy today Senator**

**Franken, because today I have been notified that I have been accepted as a United States Citizen."**

***Friends, immigrants do not poison the blood of America, as a certain political candidate believes, immigrants are the life blood of America.***

**In the Scripture Reading I shared earlier, Paul is writing to the Corinthian Church about not losing heart. He says, "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." This is a beautiful passage for those of us who are aging and becoming more reflective, *which is all of us!* I don't need Paul to tell me that my "outer nature" is wasting away. I am aware! As I continue to grow spiritually, however, recognizing myself as an *Experiential, Relational, Mystery Accepting, Journey and Justice focused theologian*, and surrounded by *the Love of God*, my inner nature is being renewed every day. Within my soul, a message such as this is always being written, changed and added to. I trust the God who is on journey with me, and who helps me, "look not to the**



**things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."**