

The Grace That Shaped My Life

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The grace that shaped my life came not in the form of episodes culminating in a private experience of conversion but, first of all, in the form of being inducted into a public tradition of the Christian church.

The reformation of the Christian church that occurred in the Swiss cities during the second quarter of the sixteenth century took two main forms. One eventuated in the movement known as Anabaptism. The other became embodied in the churches known throughout Continental Europe as Reformed, and in Scotland as Presbyterian. I was reared in the tradition of the Dutch Reformed Church transplanted to the United States. My parents had themselves in their youth emigrated from the Netherlands. The place was a tiny farming village on the prairies of southwest Minnesota—Bigelow.

Simplicity, Sobriety and Measure

In his book on English dissenting movements, the poet and critic Donald Davie remarks that

it was... John Calvin who first clothed Protestant worship with the sensuous grace, and necessarily the aesthetic ambiguity, of song. And who that has attended worship in a French Calvinist church can deny that—over and above whatever religious experience~he may or may not have had—he has had an aesthetic experience, and of a peculiarly intense kind? From the architecture, from church-furnishings, from the congregational music, from the Geneva gown of the pastor himself, everything breathes simplicity, sobriety, and measure.¹

That's it exactly: simplicity, sobriety and measure. We "dressed up" on the Lord's Day, dressed up for the Lord's Day, and entered church well in advance of the beginning of the service to collect ourselves in silence, silence so intense it could be touched. The interior was devoid of decoration, plaster painted white, ceiling pitched to follow the roof, peak high but not too high. The only "richness" was in the wooden furnishings. These were varnished, not painted; as a child I dwelt on the patterns in their unconcealed woodiness—perhaps because, coming from several generations of woodworkers, I was from infancy taught reverence for wood. We faced forward, looking at the Communion table front center, and behind that, the raised pulpit. Before I understood a word of what was said I was inducted by its architecture into the tradition.

Then the consistory entered, men dressed in black or blue suits, faces bronzed and furrowed from working in the fields, shining from scrubbing; this was the Lord's Day. Behind them came the minister. Before he ascended the pulpit one member of the consistory shook his hand; when he descended from the pulpit at the end of the service all the members of the consistory shook his hand, unless they disagreed. We sang hymns from here and there—nineteenth-century England, sixteenth-century Germany. But what remains in my ear are the psalms we sang. Every service included psalms, always sung, often to the Genevan tunes. Sometimes the services were in Dutch; then the older people sang the psalms from memory, always to the Genevan

tunes. My image of the hymn tunes was that they jumped up and down. My image of the Genevan psalm tunes was that they marched up and down in stately, unhurried majesty—sometimes too unhurried for me as a child! The minister preached at length, often with passion, sometimes with tears, the content of the sermons—usually doctrine followed by application. He led us in what was known as “the long prayer,” during which the consistory stood, eyes closed, swaying back and forth. Four times a year we celebrated the Lord’s Supper. In a long preliminary exhortation we were urged to contemplate the depth of our sins and the “unspeakable” grace of God in forgiving our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, in silence alive, the bread and wine were distributed. The minister communicated last.

There was no fear of repetition. The view that only the fresh and innovative is meaningful had not invaded this transplant of the Dutch Reformed tradition in Bigelow, Minnesota. Through repetition, elements of the liturgy and of Scripture sank their roots so deep into consciousness that nothing thereafter, short of senility, could remove them. “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who has made heaven and earth,” said the minister to open the service, unflinchingly.

The cycle for one of the two sermons each Sunday was fixed by the Heidelberg Catechism. This catechism, coming from Heidelberg in Reformation times, had been divided up into fifty-two Lord’s Days; the minister preached through the catechism in the course of the year, taking a Lord’s Day per Sunday. It was doctrine, indeed, but doctrine peculiarly suffused with emotion—perhaps because, as I now know, it had been formulated for a city filled with exiles. The first question and answer set the tone; decades later they continue to echo in the chambers of my heart:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?

A: That I am not my own but belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.

A Sacramental Theology

If the aesthetic of this liturgy was simplicity, sobriety and measure, what was its religious genius? The only word I have now to capture how it felt then is *sacramental*; it felt profoundly sacramental. One went to church to meet God; and in the meeting, God acted, especially spoke. The language of “presence” will not do. God was more than present; God spoke, and in the sacrament, “nourished and refreshed” us, here and now sealing his promise to unite us with Christ. Ulrich Zwingli had considerable influence on the liturgy of the Reformed churches; for example, it was he rather than Calvin who set the pattern of quadrennial rather than weekly Eucharist. In part that was because he insisted that the climax of the Eucharist was Communion, and he could not get his parishioners to communicate weekly, accustomed as they were to communicating just once a year; in part it was because he interpreted the Lord’s Supper as entirely our action, not God’s. But in word and tone the liturgy I experienced was a liturgy of God’s action; it was “Calvinistic.” During the liturgy as a whole, but especially in the sermon, and most of all during the Lord’s Supper, I was confronted by the speech and actions of an awesome, majestic God. Of course, liturgy was our action as well, not just God’s. We gave voice, always in song, never in speech, to praise and thanksgiving and penitence. The religious genius of the liturgy was interaction between us and God.

And throughout there was a passionate concern that we appropriate what God had done and was doing. We were exhorted to prepare ourselves so as to discern and receive the actions of God; it didn’t happen automatically. It was as if the “secret” prayers of the Orthodox liturgy had been changed into exhortations and spoken aloud; the concern with right doing was the same. And we were exhorted, as we went forth, to live thankfully and gratefully. Max Weber argued, in his famous analysis of the origins of capitalism, that the energetic activism of the Calvinists was designed to secure the success that was taken as a sign of membership among the elect. I can understand how it would look that way to someone on the outside; and possibly there were some on the inside, English Puritans, for example, who did think and speak thus. But it has always seemed to me a ludicrous caricature of the tradition as I experienced it. The activism was rather the activism congruent to gratitude. Sin, salvation, gratitude: that was the scheme of the “Heidelberg.” Conspicuous material success was more readily taken as a sign of shady dealing than

of divine favor.

My induction into the tradition, through words and silences, ritual and architecture, implanted in me an interpretation of reality—a fundamental hermeneutic. Nobody offered “evidences” for the truth of the Christian gospel; nobody offered “proofs” for the inspiration of the Scriptures; nobody suggested that Christianity was the best explanation of one thing and another. Evidentialists were nowhere in sight! The gospel was report, not explanation. And nobody reflected on what we as “modern men” can and should believe in all this. The scheme of sin, salvation and gratitude was set before us, the details were explained; and we were exhorted to live this truth. The modern world was not ignored, but was interpreted in the light of this truth rather than this truth being interpreted in the light of that world.

The picture is incomplete without mention of the liturgy of the family. Every family meal—and every meal was a family meal—was begun and concluded with prayer, mainly prayers of thanksgiving principally, though not only, for sustenance. We did not take means of sustenance for granted; my family was poor. Food, housing, clothes—all were interpreted as gifts from God—again the sacramentalism, and again, a sacramentalism of divine action rather than divine presence. Before the prayer following the meal there was a reading, usually from Scripture chosen on a *lectio continua* scheme, but sometimes from devotional literature, and often from a Bible-story book. Thus between church and home I was taught to read the Bible as doctrine, as Torah and as narrative; that there might be tension among these never occurred to me.

The Center

The piety in which I was reared was **a piety** centered on the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament together. Centered not on experience, and not on the liturgy, but on the Bible; for those themselves were seen as shaped by the Bible. Christian experience was the experience of appropriating the Bible, the experience of allowing the Bible to shape one’s imagination and emotion and perception and interpretation and action. And the liturgy was grounded and focused on the Bible: in the sermon the minister spoke the Word of God to us on the basis of the Bible; in the sacraments, celebrated on the authority of the Bible, the very God revealed in the Bible united us to Christ. So this was the Holy Book. Here one learned what God had done and said, in creation and for our salvation. In meditating on it and in hearing it expounded one heard God speak to one today. The practice of the tradition taught without telling me that the Bible had to be interpreted; one could not just read it and let the meaning sink in. I was aware that I was being inducted into one among other patterns of interpretation, the pattern encapsulated in the Heidelberg Catechism; sometimes polemics were mounted against the other interpretations.

The center from which all lines of interpretation radiated outward was Jesus—Jesus Christ. Of course I knew he was human; but the humanity of Jesus Christ did not function much in my imagination or anyone’s interpretation. Jesus Christ was the incarnated second person of the Trinity. I must say in all candor (and with some embarrassment) that not until about five years ago, when I read some books on Jesus by Marcus Borg, E. P. Sanders, Ben Meyer, Tom Wright and Gerd Theissen, books that set Jesus within the context of first-century Palestinian Judaism, did Jesus’ polemic with the Pharisees finally make sense to me and did Jesus become a genuinely human figure.

Describing precritical modes of biblical interpretation in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei remarks that “biblical interpretation [was] an imperative need, but its direction was that of incorporating extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story—not the reverse.” Then Frei quotes a passage from Erich Auerbach, in which Auerbach is contrasting Homer with Old Testament narrative:

Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. ... Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world..., must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.

Frei then continues with the comment, “In the process of interpretation the story itself, constantly adapted to new situations and ways of thinking, underwent ceaseless revision; but in steadily revised form it still remained the adequate depiction of the common and inclusive world until the coming of modernity.”² If Frei is right, the mentality in which I was reared was premodern; one of the ironies of history is that it now looks postmodern as well.

The Full Pattern

I remember my father sitting at the dining-room table during the long winter evenings in our house in the village on the Minnesota prairies, making pen and ink drawings. All his life long, I now believe, he wanted to be an artist; but he grew up in the Depression, child of displaced Dutch city dwellers consigned to farming in the New World, and it was never a possibility. There was in him accordingly a pervasive tone of disappointment. He was on intimate terms with wood; but wood was not yet art for him. I have since learned of Christians who see art as a device of “the enemy,” something to be avoided at all costs. I have learned of other Christians who are torn in pieces by art, unable to leave it alone, yet told by those around them that art is “from the other side.” My father-in-law was one of those troubled lovers of art. But not my father.

I have also learned of Christians for whom the life of the mind is “enemy.” That too was not my experience. I take you now on our move from Bigelow to Edgerton, forty-five miles distant, in my early teens. My mother died when I was three. Of her I have only two memories:

being held in her lap on a rocking chair when my arms were full of slivers, and seeing her lying still and pale in a coffin in our living room while I ate strawberries. After a few years of loneliness my father remarried and we moved to Edgerton, the village from which my stepmother, Jennie Hanenburg, came. The Hanenburgs were and are a remarkable family: feisty, passionate, bright, loyal. Though our family lived in the village, most of the others were farmers. So after morning church they all came to our house—aunts and uncles, cousins, everybody, boisterous dozens of them. Sweets were eaten in abundance, coffee drunk; and the most dazzling intellectual experience possible for a young teenager took place. Enormous discussions and arguments erupted, no predicting about what: about the sermon, about theology, about politics, about farming practices, about music, about why there weren’t as many fish in the lakes, about what building the dam in South Dakota would do to the Indians, about the local schools, about the mayor, about the village police officer, about the Dutch Festival, about Hubert Humphrey. Everyone took part who was capable of taking part—men, women, teenagers, grandparents. I can hear it now: one aunt saying at the top of her voice, “Chuck, how can you say a thing like that?” And Chuck laughing and saying, “Well, Clara, here’s how I see it.” Then when it was time to go, everyone embracing.

I must mention especially my Aunt Trena, one of the most wonderful women I have known; she also died young. One Saturday afternoon I walked into her house and heard the Metropolitan Opera playing on her radio; to me as a young teenager it was caterwauling. So I asked her why she was listening to that. Her answer remains for me a marvel and a parable: “Nick, that’s my window onto the world.” She had never gone to school beyond the fifth grade; she was then trying to finish high school by correspondence.

Reverence for wood and for art in my father; reverence for the land and the animals in my uncles, sometimes even for machinery; longing reverence for music in my aunt; reverence for the life of the intellect in everybody. In the tenth book of his *Confessions* Augustine imagines the things of the world speaking, saying to him: Do not attend to us, turn away, attend to God. I was taught instead to hear the things of the world saying: Reverence us; for God made us as a gift for you. Accept us in gratitude.

It has taken me a long time to see the full pattern of the tradition. I think it was something like this: the tradition operated with a unique dialectic of affirmation, negation and redemptive activity. On the reality within which we find ourselves and which we ourselves are and have made, I was taught to pronounce a differentiated yes and no: a firm yes to God’s creation as such, but a differentiated yes and no to the way in which the potentials of creation have

been realized in culture, society and self. And I was taught, in response to this discriminating judgment, to proceed to act redemptively, out of the conviction that we are called by God to promote what is good and oppose what is bad, and to do so as well as we can; as an old Puritan saying has it, “God loveth adverbs.” The affirmation of what is good in creation, society, culture and self was undergirded by a deep sacramental consciousness: the goodness surrounding us is God’s favor to us, God’s blessing, God’s grace. Culture is the result of the Spirit of God brooding over humanity’s endeavors.

The tradition operated also with a holistic understanding of sin and its effects, of faith and of redemption. By no means was everything in society, culture and personal existence seen as evil; much, as I have just remarked, was apprehended as good. The holistic view of sin and its effects instead took the form of resisting all attempts to draw lines between some area of human existence where sin has an effect and some area where it does not. The intuitive impulse of the person reared in the Reformed tradition is to see sin and its effects as leaping over all such boundaries. To the medievals who suggested that sin affects our will but not our reason, the Reformed person says that it affects our reason as well. To the Romantics who assume that it affects our technology but not our art, the Reformed person says it affects art too.

Corresponding to this holistic view of sin and its effect is then a holistic view as to the scope of genuine faith. Faith is not an addendum to our existence, a theological virtue, one among others. The faith to which we are called is the fundamental energizer of our lives. Authentic faith transforms us; it leads us to sell all and follow the Lord. The idea is not, once again, that everything in the life of the believer is different. The idea is rather that no dimension of life is closed off to the transforming power of the Spirit—since no dimension of life is closed off to the ravages of sin. But faith, in turn, is only one component in God’s program of redemption. The scope of divine redemption is not just the saving of lost souls but the renewal of life—and more even than that: the renewal of all creation. Redemption is for flourishing.

Third, the tradition operated with the conviction that the Scriptures are a guide not just to salvation but to our walk in the world—to the fundamental character of our walk. They are a comprehensive guide. They provide us with “a world and life view.” This theme of the comprehensiveness of the biblical message for our walk in this world matches, of course, the holistic view of sin and of faith.

The grace of God that shapes one’s life came to me in the form of induction into this tradition. That induction into tradition should be an instrument of grace is a claim deeply alien to modernity. Tradition is usually seen as burden, not grace. But so it was in my case. If you ask me who I am, I reply: I am one who was bequeathed the Reformed tradition of Christianity.

Calvin College

And bequeathed the benefits of a remarkable institution in this tradition, Calvin College. Institutions are also not customarily seen as instruments of the grace that shapes one’s life with God. But so it was in my case.

I had entered what seemed to me a world of dazzling brightness. In part it was a journey into self-understanding. For here, in this college of the tradition, I began to understand the tradition and thus myself. I learned how to live with integrity within this tradition, within any tradition—how to discern and embrace its fundamental contours while treating its details as *adiaphora*, how to discern and appropriate what is capable of nourishing life in one’s own day and how to let the rest lie, how to empathize with the anxiety and suffering embodied in one’s tradition and how to celebrate its accomplishments.

More important than coming to understand the tradition, I saw the tradition at work in some remarkably intelligent, imaginative and devoted teachers. I came with the conviction that I was called to make my thoughts captive to Jesus Christ. But now I was plunged deep into the culture of the West—its literature, its philosophy, its theology, its science; everything; nothing was off-limits. The challenge constantly placed before us was to struggle to understand this massive inheritance “in Christian perspective.” And more than that: ourselves to embody Christ in culture—ourselves to compose poetry and write philosophy and paint paintings that would breathe the Spirit of

Christ. There are two cities, said one of our teachers, Harry Jellema, with gripping charisma, using the language of Augustine, there are two cities—then he would switch to the Latin—the *civitas Del* and the *civitas mundi*. Your calling is to build the *civitas Del*.

Here too nobody was offering evidences for the truth of Christianity, arguments for the inspiration of Scripture, proofs for the resurrection of Jesus, best explanation accounts of Christian faith. The challenge set before us was to interpret the world, culture and society in the light of Scripture—to describe how things look when seen in Christian perspective, to say how they appear when the light of the gospel is shed on them.

It was heady stuff; and we students were as energized and instructed by each other as by our teachers. In my sophomore year I met Alvin Plantinga; we became at once dear friends ~and have remained that ever since. More important, from that time on we have engaged together in the project of Christian philosophy, parceling out the work, learning from each other—but let me be candid, I learning more from Al than Al from me. There was one college class in which Al and I were the only students, a course in Kant’s “pure critique” taught by Harry Jellema. A few years back, Al gave the Gifford Lectures; a few years hence, I am slated to give them. Harry Jellema would have chuckled with delight at learning that all the students in one of his classes had become Gifford Lecturers. Too bad he’s no longer alive—though perhaps he knows without my telling him. He was the pioneer, breaking up the sod for the second and third generations, for people like O. K. Bouwsma and William Frankena and Henry Stob and Al and myself, and lots of others; I continue to think that he was maybe the most profound of us all. Certainly the most charismatic.

No doubt some students were bored stiff with all this heady stuff. And some were there for reasons quite different from ours: they too had grown up in the tradition, but were angry with it, infuriated by all its rough edges. Their interest was not Nietzsche interpreted in the light of the tradition but Nietzsche for use as ammunition against the tradition. The arguments we had were wonderful!

I must say a word about Abraham Kuyper, who was in many ways the spiritual eminence behind the college. Kuyper was a turn-of-the-century Dutchman whose creativity came to expression in many areas—church, politics, academia, journalism. For our purposes, what was important was Kuyper’s model of theory-construction. Since Aristotle, everybody in the West had regarded proper theorizing as a generically human activity. To enter the chambers of theory one must lay aside all one’s particularities and enter purely as a human being. Our religions, our nationalities, our genders, our political convictions—we are to take them off and line them up in the entry. Of course we are never successful at this; always there are some peculiarities that we have failed to strip off. Part of what our peers in the room must do, whenever they notice that, is call it to our attention. It follows that proper theorizing does not eventuate in Muslim sociology or feminist philosophy or Marxist literary criticism or Christian literary criticism, but simply in human sociology, human philosophy and so forth.

Kuyper didn’t believe it—didn’t believe it was possible. He didn’t think one could shed one’s nationality or one’s social class; but he especially insisted that one could not shed one’s religion. A person’s religion, on Kuyper’s view, was not an inference or a hypothesis but a fundamental determinant of that person’s hermeneutic of reality. Of course the hermeneutics of reality shaped by two different religions do not, by any means, yield differences of interpretation on everything; but unless the religions in question are very close, they yield enough differences to have consequences within the field of theorizing. Thus Kuyper thought that the goal of constructing a generically human philosophy was vain; philosophy, and academia generally, is unavoidably pluralistic. The only circumstance under which that would not be true would be that in which Christians, say, would practice amnesia about their religion while doing philosophy, and then remember it when arriving home or at church. Such amnesia Kuyper could not tolerate.

I believed this when first I learned of it in college days; I believe it still. It is a fascinatingly “postmodern” perspective; when I first read Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* my main reaction was “Well, of course.” I should add that sometimes Kuyper articulated his view in a much more “expressivist” form than I have given it above. That is to say, sometimes he talked as if the development of philosophy occurred, or should occur,

just by expressing in philosophical form one's religious convictions. That seems to me mistaken. To become a philosopher is to enter the ongoing practice of philosophy. That practice is a malleable practice; though one is shaped, one also shapes. But no philosopher ever just gives expression to his inner self. And the Christian who engages in philosophy will seek to learn from the practice and its tradition as well as to contribute to the shaping of that practice.

Later I spent thirty years of my life as a teacher at Calvin College. Or better put, as a member of that community of Christian learning. That community has been for me an instrument of grace, supporting me in my Christian reflections—challenging, correcting, supplementing, encouraging, chastising, disciplining. To know who I am, you must know that I was bequeathed the opportunity of being a member of that community. It was an instrument of grace~ I miss it deeply. But a call is a call.

Cries of the Oppressed

A notice appeared in my mailbox at the college in the spring of 1978, inviting me to attend a conference in Chicago on Palestinian rights at the end of May, sponsored by Christians. To this day I do not know who sent it. I had celebrated with everyone else I knew the astounding victory of Israel in 1967; over the years, though, I had become more and more uneasy with Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. But I did nothing about this unease, did not even, as I recall, express it to anyone other than my wife. Now this invitation. The semester was over, I didn't feel like starting summer work yet, Chicago was only about a three and a half hour's drive away; so I went.

I had not knowingly met a Palestinian before; and my image of Palestinians was that they were all Muslims. Here in one place there were about 150 Palestinians; and obviously a good many of them, I have no idea how many, were Christians. They poured out their guts in rhetoric of incredible passion and eloquence. They spoke of how their land was being wrenched away from them, and how no one cared. They said that the land in which Jesus walked would soon have no more Christians in it, squeezed out by a Zionism supported by the West and Muslim fundamentalism in reaction. They asked why we in the West refuse to hear their cry. The U.N. representative of the PLO was given permission to come, but was forbidden by the State Department to speak to all of us at once; he might speak only to groups of five people or fewer. A person who had worked for the U.S. State Department in Israel and, while there, had been commissioned to prepare a report on the torture of Palestinians in Israeli jails, rehearsed the central parts of her report; she had been fired by the State Department a few days before.

I felt cornered, confronted—confronted by the word of the Lord telling me that I must defend the cause of this suffering people. My tradition yielded me the category: it was a call. Not to answer the call would be desecrating disobedience.

I have not changed my profession. But I have gone to the Middle East several times. I have bought and read yards of books. I subscribe to out-of-the-way journals. I became chair of the board of the Palestine Human Rights Campaign. I have written; I have spoken. It hasn't always been pleasant; the Palestinians are both immensely lovable and difficult to defend. But it is a sacred call. And I do all in my power, when answering the call, to remember the pain, the anxiety and the rights of the Jewish people.

During the academic year 1980-81 Allan Boesak was at Calvin as our multicultural lecturer. He became, and remains, one of my dearest friends in all the world. I dedicated my book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* to him; I cannot do better, to say what I found in him, than to quote what I said in my dedication:

for my dear friend Allan Boesak,
black Reformed pastor and theologian from South Africa,
in whose speech
I have heard
both
the cries of the oppressed
and the Word of the Lord

I had been to South Africa in 1975 to attend a conference on behalf of Calvin College at the University of Potchefstroom. What I saw and heard there made me very angry; but it was almost exclusively whites that I talked

with. Beginning with Allan, I have met the blacks.

Very little in my background had equipped me to deal with these experiences. Of course I believed that it was the calling of us who are Christian philosophers to develop a Christian theory of justice. But here I was confronted with injustice. Or rather—that's still too abstract—I was confronted with the faces and voices of people suffering injustice.

These experiences have evoked in me a great deal of reflection and reorientation. Justice has become for me one of the fundamental cate

gories through which I view the world. I think of justice not so much as a virtue but as a condition of society: a society is just insofar as people enjoy what is due them—enjoy what they have a legitimate claim to. Previously the fundamental moral category for me was responsibility. Now I have come to see that the moral domain is an interplay between rights and responsibilities. To the Other in my presence I have responsibilities; but also the Other in my presence comes bearing rights. The violation of moral responsibility yields guilt; the violation of moral rights yields injury. The proper response to guilt is repentance; the proper response to moral injury is lament and outrage.

Slowly I began to see that the Bible is a book about justice; but what a strange and haunting form of justice! Not our familiar modern Western justice, of no one invading one's right to determine one's life as one will. Rather the justice of the widow, the orphan and the alien. A society is just when all the little ones, all the defenseless ones, all the unprotected ones have been brought back into community, to enjoy a fair share in the community's goods, and a standing and voice in the affairs of the community. Biblical justice is the shepherd leaving the corral to look for the hundredth one and then throwing a feast when the one is found.

I hadn't seen their faces before, I hadn't heard their voices; that's what changed me. I have come to think that there is little passion for justice if the faces of suffering are hidden from view and the voices muffled. But horrible to know and say: in the presence of some of those faces and some of those voices, I have discovered in myself not empathy but loathing, fear and resentment. Who shall deliver us from this bondage?

Lament for a Son

This was all before. I now live after, after the death of our son, Eric. My life has been divided into before and after.

To love is to run the risk of suffering. Or rather, in our world, to love is to suffer; there's no escaping it. Augustine knew it well; so Augustine recommended playing it safe, loving only what could neither die nor change on one—God and the soul. My whole tradition had taught me to love the world, to love the world as a gift, to love God through and in the world—wife, children, art, plants, learning. It had set me up for suffering. But it didn't tell me this: it didn't tell me that the invitation to love is the invitation to suffering. It let me find that out for myself, when it happened. Possibly it's best that way.

I haven't anything to say beyond what I've already said in *Lament for a Son*. There's a lot of silence in the book; no word too much, I hope. In the face of death we must not chatter. And when I spoke, I found myself moving often on the edges of language, trying to find images for what only images could say. The book is extremely particular; I do not speak about death, only about Eric's death. That's all I could do. But I have discovered, from what readers have told me, that in its particularity lies universality.

I see now, looking back, that in writing it I was struggling to own my grief. The modern Western practice is to disown one's grief: to get over it, to put it behind one, to get on with life, to put it out of mind, to insure that it not become part of one's identity. My struggle was to own it, to make it part of my identity: if you want to know who I am, you must know that I am one whose son died. But then, to own it redemptively. It takes a long time to learn how to own one's suffering redemptively; one never finishes learning.

Though there are strands in the Reformed tradition for which sovereignty is God's principal attribute, I don't think I ever thought of God much in terms of sovereignty. God was majesty for me, indescribable majesty. And graciousness, goodness; God is the one who blesses, blessing calling for gratitude. To be human is to be that point in the cosmos where God's goodness is meant to find its answer in gratitude: John Calvin told me that.

Now everything was different. Who is this God, looming over me? Majesty? I see no majesty. Grace? Can this be grace? I see nothing at all; dark clouds hide the face of God. Slowly the clouds lift. What I saw then was tears, a weeping God, suffering over my suffering. I had not realized that if God loves this world, God suffers; I had thoughtlessly supposed that God loved without suffering. I knew that divine love was the key. But I had not realized that the love that is the key is suffering love.

I do not know what to make of this; it is for me a mystery. But I find I can live with that. The gospel had never been presented to me as best explanation, most complete account; the tradition had always encouraged me to live with unanswered questions. Life eternal doesn't depend on getting all the questions answered; God is often as much behind the questions as behind the answers. But never had the unanswered question been so painful. Can I live this question with integrity, and without stumbling?

It moved me deeply to discover one day that John Calvin alone among the classical theologians had written of the suffering of God. Whenever he wrote of it, it was, so far as I could discover, in the same context: that of a discussion of injustice. To wreak injustice on one of one's fellow human beings, said Calvin, is to wound and injure God; he said that the cry of those who suffer injustice is the cry of God.

To Be Human

There's been a grace that's shaped my life. It came to me in the form of being inducted into a tradition of the Christian church, and in the form of participating in an institution, and in other ways as well which I haven't mentioned: in the form of persons such as my wife, my children, my friends.

But was it grace I experienced when I heard God saying to me, in the voice of the Palestinians and the South African blacks, you must speak up for these people? When God confronted the reluctant Jeremiah with his prophetic call, was that grace? And was it grace I experienced when my son was killed?

God is more mysterious than I had thought—the world too. There's more to God than grace; or if it's grace to one, it's not grace to the other—grace to Israel but not grace to Jeremiah. And there's more to being human than being that point in the cosmos where God's goodness is meant to find its answer in gratitude. To be human is also this: to be that point in the cosmos where the yield of God's love is suffering.