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“‘I Will Ask You a Question’:  
Interrogatory Theology

Ched Myers

The primary theological task of an indigenous theology in North America is to provide a frame of reference for the prolonged and intense experience of negation. We have concentrated on being an answering theology, and this is our undoing in an age when answers can have only a hollow ring. Now we must concentrate on providing a place to which to refer the questions.

—Douglas John Hall<sup>1</sup>

At a crucial juncture in his mission, Mark’s Jesus was confronted by members of the ruling Jerusalem establishment, who demanded that he present his political credentials:

By what authority are you doing these things; and who gave you this authority? (Mark 11:28)

“These things” refer to the dramatic challenges Jesus had just made to the scribal status quo: his theatrical, militant march into the capital city followed by his public disruption of commerce in the Temple (11:1–25). As far as the guardians of civic order were concerned, things had gone far enough. It was one thing for this Nazarene to have made a name for himself playing the prophet in distant provinces, quite another to have created a protest spectacle in the city of David—especially during the feast days, that tension-

ridden season in the nation's life when old symbols of liberation, uneasily latent, always threatened to erupt again. It was time to force this country preacher to divulge just what he was up to.<sup>2</sup>

*By what authority, and who gave it to you?* In all times and places, this is the central challenge put by governments to dissidents. Those in power recognize no authority they have not defined, brokered, or mediated. Conversely, any who would contest the dominant arrangements must justify themselves. It is the circular genius of State logic: There can be no protest except by permission. How will Jesus counter? He pauses, eyeing his antagonists, understanding that to defend his practice is a losing proposition as long as *they* are framing the issue. Measuring his words carefully, he goes on the offensive:

I will ask *you* one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. (11:29)

Here is Jesus' most powerful weapon, with which he lays siege to the citadel of self-referential authority: questions that drive a sharp wedge into the cracks of the social order in order to pry open its internal contradictions.

*Where do you think John's authority came from?* Jesus' opponents stiffen and gulp hard, huddling. The case of the recently martyred rebel prophet John is a delicate political matter indeed. They can hardly delegitimize the work of so popular a national hero; yet if they eulogize John, their own duplicity—as the administration that consented to his execution—will be unmasked (11:30–32). Jesus has, in effect, thrown the challenge back in their face: *Tell me whose side you are on, and we'll talk.* The breeze shifts, and an awkward silence settles heavily over the scene. Finally, like all official spokespersons under pressure, they issue no comment, refusing either to confirm or deny.

We do not know. (11:33)

So Jesus shrugs, and walks. The moral of the story: If we want to know what Jesus stands *for* in the conflict-ridden world, we had better be prepared to be questioned *by* him about our own alignments.

### Should Theology Rationalize or Problematize Social Reality?

In the Markan vignette, Jesus is challenged by the political authorities to justify his direct attack on their institutions of law and order. But instead of rationalizing his position, Jesus problematizes *theirs*. This ought to disturb North American Christians. In the U.S. today, State officials have no reason to question by what authority we act, because our actions do not question their authority. Our churches, both liberal and conservative, exhibit a peculiar constellation of dread and reverence toward public authority. We are thus like Mark's scribes—essentially noncommittal about our political alignments in the historical moment. Indeed, we tend to view religious movements that *do* challenge the State—whether Christians for Socialism in Chile or Islamic “fundamentalists” in Algeria—with utmost wariness.

There are many reasons why we U.S. Christians have sought refuge in political ambivalence. We experience enough material comfort and privilege, and are sufficiently insulated from those for whom “the system” does not work, to be relatively content with the social order and comparatively untroubled by its contradictions. We assume that our socio-political structures are, if flawed, nevertheless the lesser of evils—at least we cannot think of a better alternative. Sometimes we figure that contemporary political issues are just too complicated for the church to deal with. But what I wish to address here is the way in which our political ambivalence is rooted in an ideological bargain we have struck with modernity. The bargain is this: Christians have conceded to the State authority over the public sphere in hopes of retaining a modicum of authority over the private sphere. This is why our theology has tended to rationalize rather than problematize social reality.

Many complex historical forces have created and sustained this bargain. McClendon and Murphy<sup>3</sup> show how the philosophical forces of the Enlightenment moved theological concern away from traditional problems of collective character (“What is expected of us?”) to modern problems of personal existence (“Who am I?”) and epistemological doubt (“How can I know?”). Meanwhile, the socio-economic and technological forces of capitalism were facilitating the steady privatization of consciousness and the

disintegration of community ("I am what I produce/consume"). The bargain in the U.S. was reified politically by the Deist architects of our oligarchic republic in the Constitutional "separation of church and State." In the eighteenth century this was understandably attractive to minority Christian traditions fleeing the oppressive neo-Constantinian arrangements of Old Europe. But though intended to protect church and State from each other, this social contract has functioned over time to marginalize the former and exalt the latter. By the end of the nineteenth century the forces of the secular, monist faith of Progress and the national ideology of Manifest Destiny had thoroughly displaced older Puritan or Baptist visions of how to build a moral and plural society.<sup>5</sup> Twentieth century forces of bureaucratic centralization have rendered religion almost irrelevant, while steadily sacralizing the State. This was clearly evident in socialist countries, but is no less the case with U.S. democratic centralism.<sup>6</sup>

However gradual and complex the evolution of this public-private trade-off has been in modernity, it is every bit as Faustian a bargain for the church as was the ancient deal it cut with Constantine. It is a deal with the devil *not* because the political power of the institutional churches has been broken, or because postmodernity has brought theological pluralism. Those are *promising* features of our historical situation from the perspective of non-Constantinian theology. No, it is Faustian because it has led the church into idolatry. As Thierry Verhelst put it,

Western modernity is in pursuit of a "false infinite," that is to say a quantitative in-finite according to which one constantly produces, consumes and "progresses" more and more. Today, the consequences of this Faustian undertaking are devastating. As Raimundo Pannikar has said, Western modernity produces a substitute for transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, by conceding that faith is essentially a private matter discontinuous with public life Christian theology has forfeited its critical vocation at a time when technocratic totalitarianism is rapidly dehumanizing every aspect of life, public *and* private. We need look no further than Desert Storm or the 1992 Los Angeles uprising to see that churches in the U.S. continue to be preoccupied with personal morality or self-realization while equivocating on politically contested issues such as militarism or racism.

Conservative theologians need not question the social order because Jesus is "the answer" to all personal dilemmas. Their Jesus shrugs at public crimes while obsessing about sexual behavior. In reaction, political theologians too often simply reverse the equation, emphasizing social struggle and dismissing individual piety as irrelevant. In between, liberal theologians forever find it easier to question the existence of God than the authority of the State. And neo-liberals today carry on the "Christian realist" tradition of rationalizing U.S. power and privilege in the New World Order.

This is perhaps why Critical Theorist Walter Benjamin wrote earlier in this century that theology has become like a troll, though wise, it is "small and ugly, not risking itself to be seen in public."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the days are long past when theology was royalty in the court of critical disciplines. This is a good thing insofar as it relieves theological discourse of the untenable burden of trying *always* to speak universally and comprehensively. Yet many contemporary theologians—unsure of their role in postmodernity—are clearer about what theology can no longer claim to do than about what its task might legitimately be. Fortunately there are theologians such as Jim McClendon who *do* understand both the legitimacy and importance of the task. He has offered excellent guidelines for those of us who would do theology from the more modest but more authentic perspective of a determinate convictional community.<sup>9</sup> His "three-stranded" *Ethics* and trinitarian *Doctrine* suggest ways in which we can begin to undo the Faustian bargain.

I am one who wishes to follow McClendon in reconstructing a "baptist" theological discourse that is non-Constantinian, post-modern, and above all, biblical. But given our historical context, in which an omnivorous State simply ignores interecine theological debates, this old/new discipleship tradition needs even greater encouragement to follow Jesus in problematizing social reality. There is, after all, a certain baptist reluctance when it comes to politics.

Freedom, understood by traditional Baptists as the State's non-interference in the affairs of the church, is usually given priority over the demands of justice, which may require the church's interference in the oppressive affairs of the State. Anabaptist communities, meanwhile, have tended to withdraw from

what Cornel West calls the "public conversation." But sectarian theology merely accommodates the Faustian bargain in a different way, which is why in the U.S. baptist churches are as politically domesticated as mainline ones.

Christians need not feel responsible for the State, but we must be able-to-respond to it. We are instructed by the example of Jesus—and, for that matter, by the militant Baptist tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.—to engage the Powers wherever and whenever *anyone* in the body politic is marginalized or oppressed. And this requires a problematizing theology.

### From Confession to Quandary: Jesus as Interlocutor of Church and World

I recently read the 1992 "Birmingham Confession" issued by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, being distributed by the Baptist Peace Fellowship for wider endorsement. The statement apologizes for the Southern Baptist Convention's failure, three decades earlier, to reach out to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama after it was fire bombed in September, 1963, killing four young African American girls. While this document is still overly vague in its understanding of the demands of repentance and reconciliation, it nevertheless suggests a model for Christian acknowledgment of both historical and continuing complicity in the sin of racism. I cite it here because it reflects a growing concern among baptist-type Christians to develop a theological discourse that maintains a political edge and speaks with an eye toward the public conversation.<sup>10</sup>

This same spirit is reflected in three recent Third World *kairos* documents, in which Christians facing oppression in such places as South Africa and Central America seek to name both the sins and the signs of hope in their historical context.<sup>11</sup> These documents have in turn stimulated renewed interest in "confessional" theology in the U.S. Bill Wylie Kellermann describes this tradition:

In church history, especially Protestant tradition, it is recognized that there are extraordinary times when the church's very identity is imperiled. If its confession is not made unequivocally clear, nothing less than the meaning of the gospel with the church and before the world is at risk. This special time, a *status confessionis*, is brought on by a historical crisis within the church or without. It is

incumbent on the community of faith to discern and name the crisis and to distinguish, as clearly as it possibly can, between truth and error, even between life and death.<sup>12</sup>

He points to two such efforts (relatively unsuccessful) in the twentieth century: the Barmen Declaration in Germany under Hitler, and subsequent attempts in the U.S. and Europe to make opposition to nuclear weaponry *status confessionis*.<sup>13</sup> Following his mentor, the late William Stringfellow, Kellerman has argued that the North American church needs a confessional theology today, accompanied by a practice of public witness. Recently a number of ecumenical peace and justice groups have taken up this challenge, promoting a call to a *kairos* process in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

There is much to commend confessional theology to the church's quest to rediscover its vocation of problematizing the Faustian bargain made by capitalist religion. Public confession engages us both politically and personally, and clearly certain historical moments demand it. The 1992 Los Angeles uprising, for example, was in my opinion one such moment.<sup>15</sup> Yet that is precisely the problem for the North American church: We live in the shadow of a long legacy of scribe-like equivocation that has refused to make collective declarations of allegiance in specific situations. Issues such as slavery, war, and the equality of women have in the past and continue today to split our churches. Even if we today *could* achieve unity—declaring "Here we stand" concerning, say, homelessness or genetic engineering—do the Powers even take into account what the churches say any more?

There are other problems as well. Do not theological declarations run the risk of being tainted with triumphalism when uttered from the context of imperial culture? Are categorical pronouncements even helpful, given the terrible ambiguities confronting our society today? Above all, there is the matter of whether confession can be translated into concrete action—what Yoder calls "making the tradition credible."<sup>16</sup> The case of the 1983 U.S. Catholic Bishops Peace Pastoral would indicate that local congregations are ill-prepared to adjudicate the practical imperatives arising from a "confessional" position. In light of these ambiguities, I wonder whether confessional assertions represent the *most* appropriate theological discourse for the North American church. Canadian theologian Douglass John Hall shares my doubts. For two decades

he has been contending that a truly contextual theology for North America must adopt a discourse of negation rather than affirmation. In a 1976 essay he wrote:

Our culture is sick, and because it is also very powerful, its sickness infects the whole world. On the brink of over nihilism in our public life, and neurotically clinging to the positive in our private existences, we fear an open confrontation with the contradiction between our optimistic expectations and our increasingly depressing experiences. The repression of this contradiction is costly in life and truth. Its repression at home inevitably means that it breaks out in strange places with names which quickly become household words: Vietnam, Bangladesh, Chile. . . . There can therefore be no more responsible theology than one which tries to provide a climate in which men and women in this society may feel able to expose themselves to that contradictory state.<sup>17</sup>

In his recent *Thinking the Faith* Hall continues to argue that "there is no greater public task for theology in North America today than to help to provide a people indoctrinated in the modern mythology of light with a frame of reference for the honest exploration of its actual darkness."<sup>18</sup> I agree with him. But what kind of theological discourse can best promote such exploration?

In good baptist style we turn to the Bible for help; I believe that Mark's gospel offers us clues for constructing such a discourse. More than three-quarters of the pericopes in Mark are composed around questions to, by or about Jesus—from his inaugural challenge to scribal authority (1:24) to the story's closing quandary (16:3). Jesus is presented not as a sage who explains life's mysteries, but as the great interlocutor of reality. His queries lay bare the "inner conflicts" of disciples and opponents alike (Gk. *dialogizes-thai*; 2:8; 8:16f; 9:33f; 11:31). Sometimes they are sharply rhetorical: "Can Satan exorcise Satan?" (3:23); "What will the owner of the vineyard do?" (12:9). Other times they are wrapped in metaphor or parable: "Is a lamp brought indoors to be put under a basket?" (4:21); "Should wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (2:19). But always they challenge both the ideology of the dominant culture ("How can the scribes say . . . ?" 12:35) and the theology of disciples ("Do you not yet understand?" 8:21). Above all—and baptists should appreciate this—they call into question

our biblical literacy: "Have you never read . . . ?" (2:25; 12:10); "Is it not written . . . ?" (9:12; 11:17).

But Jesus the Interlocutor is neither a Grand Inquisitor nor a Devil's Advocate. He is rather the great pedagogue of what Paulo Friere calls "conscientization." Friere's work in promoting literacy among the poor showed him that the empowering teacher provides the right question, not the right answer: "The educator's role is to propose problems about the codified existential situation in order to help the learners arrive at a more and more critical view of their reality."<sup>19</sup> Mark's Jesus is indeed such an educator, problematizing the world view of his followers and his opponents because it is problematic from the vantage point of the Kingdom.

#### *Jesus questions the world.*

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets Jesus is a relentless interrogator of those in power. With deadly rhetorical aim he exposes the duplicity behind official piety: e.g. theological legitimations of elite social power that appeal to heaven (8:12), or to intellectual traditions (10:3), or to Temple State nationalism (12:35). When challenged by the authorities, Jesus turns the tables with brilliantly crafted counter-questions that unmask their ideological agenda, such as their attempts to control the economy of redemption (2:9) or their subservience to Roman interests (12:16). Even when in legal jeopardy and cornered in a public showdown, Jesus acts as prosecutor, not defendant: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (3:4). So skillful is he at severing the identification of State authority with the sovereignty of God that in the end, Mark tells us, Jesus' opponents stopped debating with him:

When Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared anymore to press questions to him (12:34).

Jesus' actions, too, challenge the structures of authority. His practice of exorcism seeks to name the very demons of empire trying to name and control him (5:7-9). It challenges a "House divided" (3:23) and symbolically enacts the denouement of an ancient prophetic plot:

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple . . . But who can stand when he appears? . . . Then I will draw near to you for judgment, to bear witness against sorcerers and adulterers, against those who swear falsely and who oppress hired workers in their wages, against those who thrust aside the alien, the widow and orphan. . . . (Mal. 3:1ff)

In his direct action in the Temple<sup>20</sup> Jesus assumes the role of a divine litigator indicting public crimes:

Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples?" But you have made it a "den of thieves" (Mark 11:17).

Jesus cross-examines Israel's most injured institution before the bar of Yahwist justice and finds it wanting: "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one stone left upon another. . . ." (13:2). Mark's Jesus is thus portrayed not as the *answer* to our private questions but as the *question* to our public answers.

*Jesus questions the church.*

Jesus' also directs his queries toward his own disciples.

Who is my mother and my brother? (3:33)

What is the kingdom of God like? (4:30)

Why are you afraid? (4:40)

Why are you both arguing with the scribes? (9:33)

Can you be baptized with my baptism? (10:38)

Why do you bother this woman's good deed? (14:6)

Could you not keep watch with me? (14:37)

Jesus' questions open up painful and awkward uncertainties for disciples: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" (8:18). Moreover, his teaching and practice provoke our incredulity (10:24,32). But this is precisely his pedagogical strategy—to break the spell of credulity the dominant order casts over its subjects, to force a crisis of faith. Incredulity can be subversive, for doubt about the world is a "necessary condition" to joining the struggle to transform it.

At the structural center of Mark's story is Jesus' famous double question to his disciples, upon which all Christian theology turns:

"Who do the people say that I am? . . .  
Who do you say I am?" (8:27,29a)

Here Mark boldly transforms the foundational declaration of Hebrew faith—"God said to Moses, 'I am who I am!'" (Exod. 3:14)—into a query. Significantly, Peter sees in this remarkable solicitation a happy occasion for confessional orthodoxy: "You are the Christ!" (8:29b). Yet Jesus responds to Peter as if he were merely another demon attempting to "name" him—he silences him (8:30; cf. 1:25; 3:12; 9:25).

This precipitates what I have called the "confessional crisis" in Mark (8:31–33).<sup>21</sup> Jesus repudiates Messianic triumphalism by invoking the political vocation of the Human One; Peter attempts in turn to repudiate such a "negating" theology. Jesus then utterly problematizes the matter by aligning the Petrine confession (which was, let us not forget, the creed of the churches to which Mark wrote, and which still read him today) with *Satan!* The struggle concludes with Jesus' invitation to his disciples to a practice of the cross (8:34ff). Mark thus displaces Peter's confession with Jesus' quandary about losing life in order to save it. The later trial narrative reiterates this theological displacement. Jesus is "not ashamed" of the Human One before the Powers—and loses his life (14:62ff); at the very same moment Peter is "ashamed" of Jesus while trying to save his own hide (14:66ff). The courage and commitment to the public order lay at the heart of Jesus' courtroom "confession"; conversely, the dread of and reverence for authority lay at the root of Peter's courtyard quandary—and ours today.

Finally, in Mark the interlocuted also become interlocutors. The disciples do not say much in Markan theatre. Their few lines function to reveal the shadowy hues of their humanity—duplicity (10:39), equivocation (14:19), or plain foolishness (9:5). Their incredulity does however cause them to ask questions of their own, even if they are leery (5:31), leading (10:35), or pleading (4:38) ones. Their quandaries resound perhaps most sharply in the hollows of our readerly stomachs, for in them our own deepest anxieties about discipleship are laid bare. Who of us has not wondered why Jesus seems absent in the midst of storms that threaten to sink us (4:41)? Have we not many times puzzled resentfully over how to respond to the overwhelming needs of the

poor, given our meager resources (6:37; 8:4)? Awed by the legitimacy of the rich and powerful, do we not constantly check our bearings according to their maps (9:11), unable to imagine a history freed from their control (10:26)? Do we not rage against our impotence (9:29) and doubt in our innermost selves whether the world can really ever be changed (13:4)? Battered by disappointment and failure, do we not agonize over our own betrayal (14:19) and too often despair that we have come to the end of the line (16:3)? Mark's Jesus, then, offers believers not certitude but queries that force us to encounter our individual and corporate darkness.

Jesus has been variously named by the church—Christ, Sophia, Suffering Servant, Good Shepherd, Word of God. Whatever else he may be, however, he is Lord only insofar as he is Interlocutor of church and world. Mark's gospel, the prototype of Christian narrative theology, suggests that the church's own theological discourse should also be *interrogatory*. Unfortunately, when the early church struck its deal with Constantine, it moved decisively away from questioning reality and began its long theological orbit around the propositional discourse of dogma, institutionalized in the great declarative confessions.<sup>22</sup> As long as the church understood Christ to be mysteriously present among the poor, and itself inhabited the margins, no ruler's authority was beyond question, no social system beyond critical scrutiny. But once Christ was located on a heavenly throne and Christians were advisors in earthly courts, the grounds on which theology could (or dared) challenge the authority of emperor, pope, or king narrowed considerably. The mountain of ecclesial doctrine thus long ago buried the voice of Jesus the Interlocutor in our churches.

Like Peter in the palace courtyard (Mark 14:54), we North American Christians today warm ourselves by the fire of imperial certainties even as we are chilled to the bone by the protracted historical quandaries swirling around us. Our domesticated theologies have exchanged the messianic commission to question public authority for the empire's sanction to peddle private religious answers. We, too, make our confession too soon and realize our denial too late. But the subversive genius of Mark can help the church again learn how to engage itself and the world with problematizing quandaries that animate rather than with rationalizing

answers that pacify. Recovering the disturbing and disrupting character of interrogatory theology could not be more important. We live in a socio-political universe of high mystification that can only be "de-coded" (as Friere would say) through relentless interrogation. The convolutions and duplicities of our public discourses—whether commercial ("Chevy is the heartbeat of America") or political ("It's morning in America")—are designed to preclude critical apprehension and mire us in a culture of consuming credulity and political passivity.

Theology must learn again to ask questions. Below I suggest two discursive traditions that I believe can help us. One is a philosophical and prophetic tradition that spared no question of the world. The other is an ecclesial and pastoral tradition that models how the church can persistently question itself.

### Prophetic Negation: Critical Theory

"A refusal to cut off further relevant questions even when they lead us into the darkness of negativity"—this was the central thrust of the mid-twentieth century intellectual tradition known as Critical Theory, according to its foremost North American theological interpreter Matthew Lamb.<sup>23</sup> Critical Theory was founded by the "Frankfurt School" of philosophy: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and best-known in the U.S., Herbert Marcuse. It "emerged from a distinct crisis in the European bourgeois culture" in the aftermath of World War I, writes Paul Mendes-Flohr, that deepened through the experience of the Third Reich and the Cold War: "The modern world had indeed witnessed the creation of a splendid, majestic edifice, but it was held to be a Trojan horse hiding within insidious forces bent on humanity's spiritual and psychic emasculation."<sup>24</sup>

Adherents of Critical Theory articulated a profound disillusionment with the optimistic creeds of modernism—Enlightenment rationalism, technocracy, and above all, history-as-Progress. They were among the first to understand that these positivistic myths could be countered neither by pessimism nor skepticism, but only by a thoroughgoing discourse of negation. Through its so-called "negative dialectics," Critical Theory challenged the most basic assumptions of modernity:

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer develop the antithetical or "inverse" insights into how scientific reason is mythic, how enlightened liberal morality is barbaric, how technological progress is retrogression. Benjamin caught this inverse insight imaginably: "Marx says, revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But perhaps . . . revolutions are the grasp by the human race travelling in this train for the emergency brake."<sup>25</sup>

"If the twentieth century vaunts an ideology of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," continues Lamb, "then critical theory poses the uncomfortable question of why no other century has witnessed such massive destruction of human life by human beings." If the Frankfurt School set its face against modernity, it was nevertheless squarely within the Enlightenment tradition of rational criticism—in much the same way that Anabaptists were within the spirit of the Reformation. In both cases, these radical minorities refused to suspend their criticism once the reformist movements that spawned them began to compromise with systems of domination.

The modern era began when the "Age of Reason" overthrew the sacred totalism of the "Age of Faith" through scientific inquiry into how the physical universe was ordered, breaking the grip of the old cosmologies. At the same time, nascent industrial capitalism sought to transform traditional economic culture while the emerging bourgeoisie questioned the divine right of kings and launched new republican experiments in democracy. But once the old feudal order was shattered, liberal thought became increasingly unable or unwilling to turn criticism back upon its own constructs. "The old order of sacral hierarchy gave way to a new order of secular bureaucracy in which the myth of identity between reason and reality would be legitimated by an empirical science increasingly constituted by 'value-free' observation and quantification as the only valid form of rationality."<sup>26</sup> New totalist and instrumentalist theories of the universe, society, and the human being were now legitimating colonial projects, advancing military technologies, and undergirding industrial profiteering.

Marx launched a second phase of criticism by challenging the absolute claims of liberal capitalism. He formulated his theory of human alienation by studying how an uncontrolled economy controlled all social relations, "practising a new form of dialectical analysis which exposed the basic economic contradiction inherent

in capitalist relations of production" and introducing the notion of class struggle.<sup>27</sup> Marx thus inspired a new round of struggle for freedom and justice throughout the industrializing world, though his theory of revolution ironically found its most dramatic expression in semi-feudal Russia. Again, however, once Marxist criticism was reified and canonized in state socialism, its revolutionary power atrophied, as Leninism yielded to Stalinism. Hegemonic Marxism, like liberalism before it, became a legitimating ideology for bureaucratic totalism. By the mid-twentieth century, then, European civilization seemed to offer only "the cynical choice between monopoly-controlled states or state-controlled monopolies."<sup>28</sup>

The Frankfurt School thus launched a third tradition of criticism, arguing that the mass cultures of western and eastern blocks were more alike than different. The "conveyors of packaged images and symbols"—whether Soviet propagandists or Madison Avenue hucksters—were strangling political imagination.<sup>29</sup> Marcuse understood clearly the monistic character of technocracy:

As a technological universe, advanced industrial society is a *political* universe, the latest stage in the realization of a specific historical *project*—namely, the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination. As the project unfolds, it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture. In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilizes the society and contains technical progress within the framework of domination.<sup>30</sup>

Negative dialectics attempted to resist this totalism by deconstructing its foundational myths and interrogating its social and intellectual conventions in order to free political imagination again and re-animate the struggle for human liberation.

Critical Theory was, predictably, berated from the political Right for its "sour grapes" about modern society. But there were objections from the Left as well, the most telling complaint being that its thoroughgoing negativity undermined efforts to construct concrete social alternatives. Indeed, many Critical Theorists were leery of political activism, with the notable exception of Marcuse. Yet during the 1960s Critical Theory was rehabilitated as part of

the intellectual underpinning of the New Left, student anti-war protests and the counter culture. But as these movements began to unravel in the 1970s, doubts were again raised about the politics of negation. A notable chapter in this debate was the often-heated dialogue between North Atlantic political theologians inspired by Critical Theory and Latin American liberation theologians influenced by Marxism-Leninism.<sup>31</sup> Political theology, disillusioned by the atrophy of human rights in Eastern Europe, rejected socialist positivism and "every identification of utopian thinking with Christian eschatology."<sup>32</sup> Writing from the perspective of insurgent Latin America, Juan Luis Segundo countered that this seemed "much more akin to the Cartesian theoretical revolution based on methodic doubt than to real practical revolution."<sup>33</sup>

An analogous debate rages in current cultural theory, which is awash in Deconstructionism. "It is remarkable how parallel deconstructionism is," notes Marxist Terry Eagleton in his study of Benjamin, "to the later Frankfurt school [in its] rage against positivity, the suspicion of determinate meaning *as such*, the fear that to propose is to be complicit."<sup>34</sup> Deconstructionists rightly insist that the mystifying discourses of capitalist culture must be dismantled.<sup>35</sup> But the exclusive focus on discourse leads Raymond Williams to call them merely "textual revolutionaries" who posit "the universality of alienation, the position of a closely associated bourgeois idealist formation."<sup>36</sup> Eagleton contends that this tendency can be traced to the failure of radical student politics in Europe in the late 1960s: "Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language."<sup>37</sup>

A theology of discipleship must indeed be leery of theoretics that give primacy to discourse-critique over practice and that are thus reluctant to make political choices and forge constructive social programs. At the same time, the political developments of the last decade suggest that neither our practice nor our criticism has been nearly critical *enough*. On one hand the failure of many Third World revolutionary movements has chastened theologues of liberation. On the other hand, North American political theologians have had to come to terms with the fact that the only option facing those freed from authoritarian socialism is peonage to the most totalitarian system of all. This is what Marcuse called

"society without opposition"—the iron rule of mercenary capital and its ideology of global open markets and open shop. The New World Order is rapidly destroying what remains of the integrity of both labor and the environment, while the triumphant military machine of the West now proceeds unobstructed in its "low-intensity" wars on the poor, from Panama to Somalia.<sup>38</sup> If indeed we are seeing the steady ascendancy of what Bertram Gross calls capitalist technocracy's "friendly fascism," Critical Theory and its legacy offers encouragement to our quest for interrogatory theology in at least three respects.

First, Critical Theory's uncompromising emphasis on philosophical "non-identity" with totalist ideologies echoes the First Testament's prohibition of images and the Exodus God's refusal to be named (Exod. 3:13ff). This caused some to refer to the Frankfurt School as "theological Marxism." The great "refusal" (Marcuse) to close ranks with modernity also encouraged both political theologians (e.g. Moltmann) and liberation theologians (e.g. Sobrino) to rediscover the "negativity of the Cross." Jesus' cross, argues Sobrino, "calls into question all knowledge of God based on natural theology":

God on the cross explains nothing (but) criticizes every proffered explanation. The cross is not a response; it is a new form of questioning. . . . It is not so much people asking questions about God; rather it is primarily people being called into question concerning themselves and their self-interest in trying to hold and defend a specific form of the deity.<sup>39</sup>

This represents a major step in moving theology from a rationalizing to a problematizing discourse.

Second, Critical Theory's critique of history-as-Progress inspired a whole generation of philosophers (e.g. Bloch) and theologians (e.g. Metz) to challenge the sacred assumptions of social Darwinism, from Adam Smith's "invisible hand" to Marx's "historical necessity," and to sever hope from optimism:

Against the conservative hope in restoring some semblance of balancing contradictions after the fashion of the eighteenth century's *ancien regime*, critical theory hopefully despairs. Against the liberal hope of engineering contradictions after the fashion of nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization, critical theory hopefully despairs. Against the radical hope of exploiting

contradictions for the sake of revolutionary resolutions after the fashion of twentieth-century state socialisms, critical theory hope-fully despairs.<sup>40</sup>

Many in the Frankfurt School were deeply attracted to Judeo-Christian eschatology because "its teaching of a radical disjunction between history and redemption serves to illuminate the 'metahistorical' ground of human existence and destiny."

On a deeper level, Critical Theory was a quest for transcendence that was conceived not in metaphysical but in metachronic terms. Truth . . . is not in heaven but in the future. This conception of the truth endowed the Frankfurt School, according to Horkheimer, with "the hope that the earthly horror does not possess the last word." This hope, in turn, permits one to utter a confident "No" to the existent order. Or, as Adorno asserted in terms self-consciously theological, "the only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to regard all things as the way they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."<sup>41</sup>

During the 1960s theologians were also re-reading Critical Theory, and some broke from the liberal consensus to reconsider the tradition of biblical apocalyptic as a discourse of radical transformation. Carl Braaten, for example, contrasted the "evolutionary monism" of modern development theory with Jesus' "revolutionary dualism . . . contradicting all history which wishes to build the future out of its present."<sup>42</sup> Apocalyptic hope can give baptist theology today the vision to see beyond the failures of both orthodox Marxism and laissez-fair capitalism, and to grasp the opportunity of this historical moment to promote desperately needed political imagination and social innovation.<sup>43</sup>

Third, Critical Theory has helped re-establish the ground for conversionist theology by asserting the universality of historical guilt. In the well-known dictum of Walter Benjamin, "There is no record of civilization that is not also a record of barbarism."<sup>44</sup> Some, such as Marcuse, called in their own way for repentance, arguing that people can "find their way from false to true consciousness only if they live in need of changing their way of life."<sup>45</sup> In fact, the following passage from Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* is not unlike Jesus' call to radical discipleship:

"Voluntary" servitude (voluntary inasmuch as it is introjected into the individuals), which justifies the benevolent masters, can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of containment and contentment. . . . Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitive world.<sup>46</sup>

In its rejection of modernity's pretensions to innocence and its exhortation to resistance, Critical Theory moves from the detachment of denunciation to the engagement of alternative practices.

In sum, Critical Theory's insistence on toppling the idols of modernity, its non-progressive historical hopes, and its conversionist orientation each can encourage North American baptist theology to recover an interrogatory discourse, and with it the prophetic vocation of the church. We live in a time, asserted Edward Abbey in his "Writer's Credo," when it is

not merely heretical but treasonous to question our own government's policies, to doubt the glory of planetary capitalism, to object to the religion of endless economic growth, or to wonder about the ultimate purpose, value, and consequences of our techno-military-industrial empire. Those who persist in raising doubt and question are attacked by defenders of order as the "adversary culture."<sup>47</sup> Very well: let us be adversaries.<sup>47</sup>

Jesus the Interlocutor was such an adversary, and faced its consequences. Can the church do differently?

It takes courage to follow Jesus in questioning the public order. It takes just as much courage, however, to turn our criticism of the world back upon ourselves. There is no room for self-righteousness, for Jesus is also the questioner of the church. Where can we find resources for an interrogatory theology that insists with equal vigor upon the discipline of self-examination?

### Pastoral Inquiry: Quaker "Queries"

As an historical generalization it is fair to say that the more social status and privilege the church has assumed in a given social order, the more its theological discourse has taken on a defensive, apologetic and abstract character. Conversely, when the church has had less status, or was willing to risk losing it, its theology has tended to be more offensive, critical, and practical.

We see this, for example, during the Reformation. Luther and Zwingli began as "protest" theologians, first questioning and then breaking with the Roman church. Once they decided to forge political alliances with governments, however, the tone of their discourse quickly became apologetic concerning matters of civil order, as evidenced by Luther's decision to side with the princes during the Peasant uprisings, and even more so by second-generation magisterial Calvinism.<sup>48</sup> Catholic theology, meanwhile, awakened from its complacency by the Protestant threat, recovered an *offensive* zeal in the Jesuit Counter-Reformation.

The most *consistently* evangelical, prophetic, and eschatological theological discourse of the period however belonged to the various movements of the Radical Reformation. Anabaptists were persecuted by Catholic and Protestant magistrates alike for their practical and theological challenges to prevailing religious, economic, and political orthodoxies. Walter Klaassen has rightly characterized Anabaptism as the most concerted attack on the Constantinian arrangement in the history of the church.<sup>49</sup> As McClendon has pointed out, the descendants of the Radical Reformation have continued to give priority to discipleship over dogma.<sup>50</sup> It is not surprising therefore that in *this* family tree we find a branch that came closest to adopting an explicitly interrogative theological discourse. I am referring to the discourse of "Testimonies, Advices, and Queries" that takes the place of theological doctrine among the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers.<sup>51</sup>

Testimonies, Advices and Queries represent a "cluster of practices intended to encourage Friends, individually and as groups, to hold up their lives to the Light."<sup>52</sup> This discourse, according to Quaker historian T. Canby Jones, first appeared in 1682 in the form of three questions posed by London Yearly Meeting to determine the "state of the Meeting":

What friends in the Ministry, in their respective countries, departed life since last Yearly Meeting? What friends imprisoned for their Testimony have died in prison since last Yearly Meeting? How has the Truth prospered among friends since the last Yearly Meeting and how do they fare in relation to peace and unity?<sup>53</sup>

Meant to inspire reflection on costly discipleship, these *Queries* were institutionalized in 1723, and others added over time. A century later, London Yearly Meeting developed *Advices*, "short

counsels and positive suggestions for the improvement of the life, conduct and witness of Friends . . . conceived of as supplementary and subsidiary to the *Queries*."<sup>54</sup> *Testimonies* were in turn developed to articulate "corporate convictions, concerns which we are committed to put into action as a community of faith."<sup>55</sup>

Jones defines the three elements of this discursive tradition as follows:

A Testimony is a standard of faith, ethical behavior or Gospel Order which a group of people covenants together to observe. . . . A Query is a sharply focused question designed to challenge persons or a group to live up to a corporately adopted standard of faith and behavior. . . .

An Advice is friendly counsel from the group on what it means to live by a commonly accepted testimony.<sup>56</sup>

Friends look to *Queries* to help clarify the meaning and requirements of the various Testimonies. "Meetings were asked to read out the *Queries* and have their members examine their consciences in regard to such questions as the taking of oaths . . . the witness against paying tithes . . . the keeping of slaves . . . the penal system . . . (and) whether they held their lives free enough from the excessive cumber of acquisitive vocations."<sup>57</sup>

But *Queries* are not "loaded" questions; their purpose is to facilitate an examination of the community's conscience.

Suited to the searching mood of Friends at their best, they are broad, open-ended questions to promote self-examination under the leadership of the Spirit. They are non-dogmatic, non-hortatory . . . not intended to discourage but to encourage.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, this desire not to condemn has often diffused efforts by Quaker meetings to take a firm position. Herb Lape points out that John Woolman's long campaign to get Friends to reject slavery "would not have gotten very far if the framework for . . . deliberations had been 'love and tolerance' rather than discerning the 'will of God'."<sup>59</sup> Indeed it was Woolman's opponents who appealed to meeting unity in their arguments not to exclude slave owners.<sup>60</sup>

As the vehicle for community self-assessment, then, *Queries* try to preserve a delicate balance. They are questions to our life, not accusations, yet they are *hard* questions, not merely rhetorical

ones.<sup>61</sup> Advices grow from the community's experiences of fidelity (and infidelity) to its testimonies. They are eminently practical encouragements, not legalisms. Pacific Yearly Meeting's current *Faith and Practice* does not require silence during meeting for worship, for example, but rather urges Friends "to give adequate time to study, meditation, prayer, and other ways of preparing for worship, and to arrive at meeting with an open and expectant spirit."

To see the contrast between this interrogatory, practice-centered approach to theology and traditional dogmatic discourse, let us look briefly at a concrete social issue. Because Christian pacifism has been a keen interest of McClendon's, let us take the example of the most well-known, and probably first, Quaker Testimony. The Peace Testimony was articulated by George Fox in his Declaration of 1660: "We do utterly deny all outward wars and fighting, whether for the kingdoms of this world or for the kingdom of Christ, and this is our testimony to the whole world." This practice is understood by Friends to express their conviction that "there is that of God in every person."<sup>62</sup> This radically egalitarian notion was applied by early Friends to small matters as well as large, including both dress and address (Plain Dress and Plain Speech). It represented a direct threat to established seventeenth-century conventions of social hierarchy as well as political conformity, and for this Friends were fiercely persecuted.

In today's democratic cultures, the notion of the divine in each individual has, as an abstract theological proposition, become palatable; indeed it would be affirmed by most Christian traditions. These other churches would not, however, predicate the idea on an ethical practice—so resistance to militarism does not necessarily follow. Thus, outside of the opinions of professional ethicists or the dictums of pastoral letters, mainstream Catholic and Protestant churches offer few vehicles for community self-examination on weighty matters such as war.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the Peace Testimony has anchored a long Quaker tradition of active nonviolence and noncooperation with authority.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, mainstream church acceptance today of the individual right of conscientious objection is attributable largely to Mennonite and Quaker advocacy.

Pacific Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* includes the following Query concerning the Peace Testimony:

Do we live in the virtue of that life and power which takes away the occasion of all war? Do we refrain from taking part in war as inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? What are we doing to remove the causes of war and to bring about the conditions and instruments of peace?<sup>65</sup>

To be sure, one could argue that this traditional language is too vague. Given our present context of technological militarism and the brutality of economic oppression, we might sharpen this Query for example as follows:

How are we complicit in structural violence without ever taking an aggressive personal action? How can we politically resist institutions of domination while still "seeing that of God" in those who control them? What does it mean to be in solidarity with victims of violence despite the fact that they may seek just redress through violent methods?

Advices concerning the complex and difficult matter of fidelity to the Peace Witness have not always been clear and courageous. Yet historically Friends have formulated some quite specific Advices, with Woolman again a good example. On the eve of the French and Indian wars in 1755, he and 21 others issued an epistle noting that paying tax monies for military purposes was "inconsistent with our peacable testimony."<sup>66</sup> War tax resistance has been an arena of struggle for many Friends ever since.<sup>67</sup> We need not idealize the discursive practices of Testimonies, Queries and Advices. Friends, like every other community of faith, have compromised the best of their own tradition. There are two notable problems. One is the fact that this tradition, like any other, can and has degenerated into a formalized discourse that inspires the memorialization of discipleship rather than the reproduction of it. Jones points out that by the third generation of the Quaker movement, after the Toleration Act of 1689 halted official persecution, Advices and Queries began to function more to encourage sectarian conformity than practical formation, and that in the nineteenth century, under the influence of evangelical pietism, they became increasingly devotional.<sup>68</sup> Today much of the discourse one hears in meeting strikes me as vague and overly solicitous. For example

London Yearly Meeting's 1964 *Advices on peace sound more like* sanctimonious exhortation than practical counsel:

Seek, through his power and grace, to overcome in your own hearts the emotions which lie at the root of conflict. In industrial strife, racial enmity and international tension, stand firmly by Christian principles, seeking to foster understanding between individuals, groups and nations.<sup>69</sup>

North American Quakers know well how the sharp edge of community self-examination has been dulled by prosperity and comfort.

A second problem is the tendency of contemporary liberal Quakers to disconnect their discursive tradition from its biblical moorings. Unprogrammed Friends have too often ignored Rufus Jones' warning that the authority of the Inner Light should not replace "the slow verification of truth by historical process; nor is it a substitute for Scripture."<sup>70</sup> The result over time has been theological ambivalence, followed by confusion of identity, followed by ethical drift. When our queries arise only from within ourselves there is a danger they will be confined by our own fearful horizons, cut off from the unboundaried questions of Jesus the Interlocutor and the radical biblical vision of the kingdom of God.

Still, imagine how different our churches would be if as part of our regular worship we reflected on queries concerning war, peace, and Christian witness—rather than, say, reciting ancient theological creeds! We non-Quaker Christians would do well to consider the historically attested tradition of Testimonies, Queries and Advices as a model for interrogatory theology. It has three characteristics that reflect the concerns of postmodern theology. First, it puts the concrete before the theoretical, like theologies of liberation, it seeks unity in orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Second, it puts the communal before the private, and depends on the vitality of corporate discernment; this is why Friends have developed a patient (if painfully slow) process of coming to "unity."<sup>71</sup> While the attendant questions of community formation, discipline, and decision making are beyond my scope here, they are the *right* questions from a baptist perspective.<sup>72</sup> Third, this discourse relies by design on the reflective rather than the declarative, and is thus open to constant rearticulation; in the words of

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*, Testimonies, Queries and Advices represent "landmarks, not campsites."<sup>73</sup> Testimonies endure, but should be reinterpreted into new contexts. Queries stand ever in need of honing so they do not become rote or irrelevant. Advices, by definition, must be revised as the times change so they will be practical, not rhetorical.

A discourse of queries offers a pastoral corrective to the prophetic negations of Critical Theory by turning Jesus' questions back upon ourselves. This insistence on self-examination prevents us from imagining we can somehow stand apart from the ambiguities of the world, smugly reproaching the compromises of practical politics, and reminds us how compromised we ourselves are. Sadly, hyper-critical attitudes are widespread among radical Christians today—and represent the biggest reason why the baptist movement is so fragmented. It is a great irony that alternative communities who are deeply critical of the "great" orthodoxies of the established church so often end up constructing "little" orthodoxies to replace them. We then relentlessly apply litmus tests to each other, and end up succumbing to the grand sectarian legacy of the North American Left—defining ourselves according to our differences with those closest to us.

It is a good thing for baptist communities to talk about their work and witness—this is the stuff of *testimonies*—as long as one's own practices are not held up as the *only* legitimate expression of discipleship. We need to offer each other practical suggestions about how to live more simply, or nonviolently, or justly—this is the stuff of *advices*—as long as this does not deteriorate into a new kind of "purity code." The *query* that ought to circulate among us is not "Who is the most faithful?", but rather "How can we all deepen our journey of discipleship—wherever we are starting from?" In the biblical narrative, radical judgment is accompanied by radical grace; this dialectic should also characterize baptist theology.

### Conclusion

I have contended that Mark's Jesus invites the church to rediscover the authority of questions in order to recover our vocation to question public authorities who rationalize idolatry, injustice and violence. I have further suggested that we can find support

for constructing an interrogatory theological discourse in the older ecclesial tradition of Quaker Queries and the newer philosophical tradition of Critical Theory.

In our culture of credulity, apathy, and presumed innocence, our task will not be easy, as Cornel West has pointed out:

Criticism is about discomfort—it's unsettling, it's about being transgressive in the sense of calling what one has assumed into question. America does not take well to that. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. But we could say the examined life is painful.<sup>74</sup>

McClendon himself makes the same point when he opens his *Ethics* by acknowledging that "theology means struggle":

The struggle begins with the humble fact that the church is not the world. This means that Christians face an interior struggle, inasmuch as the line between church and world passes right through each Christian heart. It nevertheless means that the standpoint, basic point of view, the theology of the church is not the standpoint, basic point of view, theology of the world.<sup>75</sup>

McClendon understands, in other words, that the vocation of theology is at once prophetic and pastoral.

As a teacher of such theology, Jim McClendon has never spared his students hard questions and never settled for easy answers. Most importantly, he has stipulated that the scholarly study of Christian theology entails "enlistment as students of this strange and demanding master," Jesus. The Christ who is our interlocutor stands before history, problematizing the church and the world from the vantage point of the kingdom of God, and inviting his disciples to do the same.