

Directives, Collectives, and Adaptives in a Changing World

November 13, 2009 LPTS Chapel

Nehemiah 13:15-20; Mark 1:39; Sirach 39: 1-5;

In case anyone happens to be counting, seminaries are becoming an endangered species. McCormick Seminary is selling off their beautiful new administration and classroom building next to the University of Chicago. Three Presbyterian seminary presidents have announced they are leaving their posts this year, including our own. We're starting to wonder as we move through the first quarter of this century if we'll still have 10 Presbyterian seminaries, or if some will go poof in the night and disappear. I've been wondering what the secret formula will be to determine which seminaries meet the challenge of the 21st century and which ones don't.

That's the growing buzz about seminaries that has been stirring my thoughts about the culture and organization of this particular seminary and whether it has what it takes to move beyond what is to what is to come. I've been working really hard to be able to be loving and positive and hopeful about my analysis of the fact that there seem to be two very different seminaries operating under one banner. If this seminary is going to survive we're going to have to start talking about these differences among us!

Well that led my thoughts back to the Bible and so called "Restoration Period" after the return of the exiles from Babylon, when the people of God experienced a crisis of identity, of community, even of survival itself. Johanna Bos has pointed out in *Making Wise the Simple*¹ that in that period when Israel returned from Babylon, the issues of how to respond to the threats of change and loss were highlighted. The returning community was faced with how to make and remake themselves in the new era, re-imagining themselves through remembering the good of the past, learning from the mistakes of the past, and creating new practices and structures that fit the new time. There is ample evidence of the

¹ Bos (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 62.

kinds of issues and struggles they experienced—Ezra and Nehemiah, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and more tangentially Ruth, third Isaiah, and several of the Psalms, all give witness to different aspects of these times. Think with me now about how that particular community of God’s people shifted and changed to meet their changing circumstances.

I think at least two major emphases existed side-by-side in that era. There were those who ruled with high direction—Ezra and Nehemiah as the examples of that—holding on to their interpretation of why God had punished the people with exile and taking responsibility for preventing wrongdoing in their own time. Then there was a very different phenomenon, an “explosion of new religious practice” among those who took liberty to try out worship in the towns and villages beyond Jerusalem, those who introduced more personal piety in the homes, and those who began the practices of interpreting the Torah more contemporaneously, a new class of leaders who would eventually become the scribes and the rabbis.

So there’s this sort of a parallel between that era and this seminary in a time of losses and changes. Yes, there are vast differences between then and now, but we can gain insight and inspiration nonetheless. I see existing side by side two very different approaches to seminary life, two different world-views, two competing understandings of what this seminary is and should become. I’m using these two as illustrations, only. There are no doubt other ways of explaining our experience in this time, but let me tell you what I’m seeing anyway.

One group among us I’m calling the “Directives.” The directives, like Ezra and Nehemiah, strive to protect the legacy of the seminary by strong, centralized, hierarchical leadership, focused in a few leaders at the top in whom full authority is vested. These are the people who see themselves as responsible for the seminary’s welfare.

The other group, I’m calling the “Collectives” who seek to protect the “ethos” of the seminary with a “flat” open and participative way of operating. The

collectives want to share the responsibility broadly and share the influence on how the seminary's life is shaped.

These two world views led us to the doctrinal disputes here in the seminary. We're not arguing the great theological dogmas of past eras. We are caught in a doctrinal dispute between those who hold firmly to their belief in the doctrine of control and those who believe firmly in the doctrine of freedom. But that's a whole other sermon.

Besides these doctrinal differences, we also have very different models of education. The directives seem to be operating on a model based on an economic exchange between the haves and the have-nots: between those who hold the knowledge, and control it, and those who have inadequate knowledge and need to be granted the gift of education. The collectives approach the educational enterprise as though there is a partnership of freedom whereby the experience and background of students is honored and respected and faculty and staff are here to provide the resources and the experiences by which students can "learn how to learn."

These two groups hold on to our positions and quietly duke it out in various ways on this campus. It's like an ongoing sibling battle of who does Mom love best!

We need to find a third way, not the middle ground, but something new and open, requiring the discipline and respect for the good of the past, but willing to let go of the pieces of the tradition and legacy that are not our true identity. Since we can't see it clearly yet, I'm choosing to call anyone who embraces this third way as the "Adaptives." Scientists refer to adaptation as the ability of a complex system to read what's going on in its environment and to shift and change in the interaction between itself and the environment. It's the way organisms and systems "learn."² Management gurus also use the term "adaptive" for the kind of leadership that faces situations that go beyond the

² Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1994) p. 17.

familiar and the known. Adaptive change situations “require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community.”³ When we put the celebration of communion at the beginning of worship and let each group identify its own pattern of doing the sacrament, we intended to provide an experience of adaptive learning instead of following a directive from on high. Notice that we found that we had some disciplines and some commonalities that we wanted to keep, and we found we could do some things differently. Adaptation is a practical theology kind of thing that is disciplined but not directed; that is neither controlled nor free, but rather is creative.

Apparently the post-exilic restoration period of Ezra and Nehemiah was a time of much adaptation. The Temple and priestly disciplines had been lost in the exile. New practices were emerging to sustain the faith. The rebuilt temple was no longer was the only center for the life of faith. The adaptive moves were begun in that era that eventually led to the institution of the synagogue which was in full swing in the period of the Gospels. Alongside village and town gathering places, the seeds were sown for the rise of the scribes, the sages, and the writings that became the Talmud, another adaptive mechanism for the practice of faith in the God of Israel.

These two additional adaptations played significant roles in the sustainability of Judaism through the historical upheavals of the next five or six centuries, through the period we know as the time of the Christian Scriptures, the destruction of the third temple and another exile or diaspora. So against the odds Judaism has survived and thrived. Some scholars suggest that survival was due to the adaptive leadership of those who found new ways to carry on the old disciplines, with creativity and faithfulness.⁴ The hierarchical directives and the free thinking collectives, either together or by themselves, would not have succeeded like the creative discipline of the adaptives.

³ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p. 13.

⁴ Paul Hanson, *The People Called* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), p. 336.

Where is the good news in these ruminations? I'm hoping that the creative spirit of God is at work, even now, in LPTS, just as she was in the time of the restoration, to raise up leaders, thinkers, faithful stewards of the seminary's truest soul, to learn and experiment, discover and adjust to be able sustain this wonderful institution through the changes and chances of the 21st century. I take in on hope, however, because we haven't talked about these differences. Hey colleagues, could we talk?

Open our ears for the sounds, open our minds to the thoughts, open our hearts to the meanings you have for us today, Creative Spirit. We wait with expectation and concentration. Amen.

Today's readings are not from the lectionary. I chose them because out of the whole sweep of scripture, these particular readings helped me, informed me, inspired me to make sense of my experience of a particular organizational dilemma facing Louisville Seminary in 2009. Listen for a word from God.

Nehemiah 13:15-19

In those days I saw in Judah people treading win presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; and I warned them at that time against selling food. ...Then I remonstrated with the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your ancestors act in his way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath.

Sirach 38 :34b-39:3 (adapted from the NSRV)

How different the sage who devotes all to the study of the law of the Most High!

That is the one who seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients,
and is concerned with prophecies;

The sage preserves the sayings of the famous
and penetrates the subtleties of parables;

Seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs
and is at home with the obscurities of parables.

Mark 1: 39

And Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The worship practice that we call “communion,” or “eucharist” or the “Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper” began with the narrative of the so called last supper Jesus ate with his closest followers prior to his execution. There are several versions of that narrative in scripture. The practice was taken up in Christian communities around the Mediterranean basin in the first few centuries of the movement, and eventually was institutionalize as a “tradition” that then was adopted as a “sacrament” by the dominant churches, with careful boundaries around what were the proper words and actions and who could and could not say and do them. Now into three millennia the church has adjusted the practice of communion to the languages and sensibilities of its times. Anyone who has visited worship in other Christian traditions—from the simplest puritan and Anabaptist traditions to the highest liturgical and orthodox knows that this ritual is practiced in several different ways.

Today we invite you to select a table somewhere here in this space, gather with whoever joins you, and at that table find a common way to enact this ritual. Here’s the plan: as we sing the “song of celebration” we’ll move to the tables. Then I’ll give you suggestions for how to proceed, each table discovering together a practice that suits. After everyone has eaten, I’ll invite each table to reflect on its experience and say how you’re thankful for today’s communion. I’ll follow that by asking each table to report a prayer for thanksgiving after the meal. We’ll return to the pews with the song of celebration.