

George W. Bashore

Meet the Crying God!

During my seminary years I was intrigued with the separated disciplines of systematic theology and practical theology. Systematic theology was influenced by the Enlightenment. We wrestled with philosophy, theology, science and meaning, utilizing a system of logic and building a rational stepladder to truth. The quest was fascinating and often titillated the mind. Our cognitive juices flowed, and we were excited about the journey. On the other hand practical theology filled us with processes, laboratory experiences, and insights enabling us to lead congregations to evangelism, nurture, mission, justice ministries, and compassionate outreach. We developed skills for counseling and pastoral care. We accumulated vast numbers of resources and leadership acumen. Now we were ready to lead the charge of congregations into discipleship for Christ in the world.

When I was asked to write about the theological and biblical underpinnings for the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty, I wondered where to begin. Papers with biblical, theological, and Wesleyan foundations are readily available. Could I write something that would make a difference? The Pharisees during Jesus' time constructed their systems of theology. They carefully built on the past and devised "correct" ways of thinking, but careful thinking failed to change attitudes and actions toward those who were "dislocated" in society. Their systematic theology created an arrogant isolation and the insidious myth that talking about God is really being a disciple of God.

Is it possible that systematic theology should have more to do with systems than logical exercises of the mind?

Theology, if it is effective and true, will change the systems within us and the systems in our society so they are formed by God. There is no division within theology.

Theology is more than study about God; it is God's meeting with us, so that God's purposes will be accomplished in this divinely created world.

Yes, what we know and believe about God is important! God is not an object to be pondered, but God is the source of love who sees the "will-to-live" in the entire created order, and cries when that "will-to-live" is obstructed and crippled. It is this love which sees the misery of the

hurting plundered, calls us to take on the nature of this God of love, and provides amazing power to create a new context for new life.

Many churches proclaim "correct" thinking about God

*Of all God's creation
is there any more wonder-filled
creature than a child? Yet there is
so much to despoil that wonder:
poverty, isolation, violence, death,
starvation, and neglect.
We are called to bless the children—
to restore the wonder.*

as shared through the centuries in the creeds. They read biblical stories, sing hymns rich in theology, and teach confirmation classes. Why then is there not an unflagging enthusiasm from our churches as they witness to Jesus Christ by advocating for justice, healing the abuses against children, lifting persons out of despair, and creating actions of love in every context? Is it possible that “right words” are not enough? Unless theology is from the inside, it will be impotent. “Oughtness” or human demand for right behavior, even couched in religious terminology, has little transforming power. Our churches must discover the God who lives, moves, and loves in the contexts of persons who live in pain and yearn for *shalom*.

Whenever there is a response of discipleship in the Scriptures, it is preceded by a meeting with God. God called the meeting with Moses at the burning bush, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . . I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people . . . out of Egypt.” God then said, “I will be with you.” God is not defined with abstract definitions but by relationships with all of the children of God, especially the poor, oppressed, and lonely. Just as Moses knew the power of God, so our congregations will experience the power of God when we are with those for whom God suffers.

Theology is not static but evocative. It is meeting God not as object but subject. God is with those in need, calling us to accompany and heal, free and love. As Christians we reproduce the pattern of the Incarnation in the world, just as we pray in our celebration of the Eucharist, “Pour out your Holy Spirit . . . that we may be for the world the body of Christ.” The call is for context-theology: to walk with God made known in Jesus Christ into the contexts of the impoverished. This is not just an appeal for acts of mercy. Hands-on theology is action and theology at the same time. It is God-relationship theology which participates in prayer, action, study, and giving with

those who are impoverished. This is not just church parlor theologizing, but doing theology in the very context where acts of mercy are taking place.

With the children of the world we will meet the crying God. Jesus’ heart reached out to Jairus’ daughter and gave her life. He not only welcomed children, but he blessed them. He was forever casting out the curses and giving blessings. This is who God is—this vulnerable

God-with-us Power agonizing, giving, healing, blessing, loving. He is the one who cries and cries out at injustice, weeping over the cities. He is the one who cries at the loss in death of his best friend Lazarus. Jesus shows us that God can’t stand the forces of death and destruction in people’s lives. He heals the blind, the crippled, the

outcast lepers. He feeds the hungry and casts out the demonic life-negating forces. He suffers with the suffering right to the cross. If we are to meet this God, then we meet God on the road with those for whom God cries and dies.

In the call for the initiative for the children of Africa the bishops wrote, “When children of Africa are fed and nourished, they are like children anywhere else in the world. They come alive; their eyes sparkle, and they laugh. They become what they were created to be: God’s gift to the earth.” As the psalmist wrote, “O Lord, . . . I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.” Of all God’s creation is there any more wonder-filled creature than a child?

Look at the faces of children: rapt attention before a make-believe world in storybooks and TV; squealing delight at the real world of car washes, fire engines, ocean waves, bird feathers, fireflies, and worms; dancing bodies with dogs and cats; excited running (even in the wrong direction) after hitting a baseball; mystery and wonder looking into the manger at the church pageant. Children are meant to have wonder. Yet there is so much to despoil that wonder: poverty, isolation, violence, death, starvation, and neglect. We are called to bless the children—to restore the won-

der. It is the Star-Child who brings wonder into our lives, piercing the darkness, and giving guidance for the way. It is this Star-Child, the Wonder-Child, who brings meaning to God’s children—our children—in the world. Through active love for children we set the context for them to meet the Star-Child.

Theodore Jennings, Jr. wrote, “How is it possible that those who are violated and afflicted will imagine that their plight is of intimate concern to a God who loves them, if they are daily and hourly reminded of the indifference of those who claim to speak for God, of those who claim to be the visible body of Christ in the world?” Several years ago J. Calvin Reber wrote to me, “If we feel no impulse to take part in a great giving to the world, is it because we do not know the world? Or is it because we have not really met Jesus Christ on life’s waysides and have never actually found in him significance of unparalleled degree—that is, are not fully Christian?”

Theology will come alive for us when we meet the crying and laughing God of wonder along with the children and the poor. God knows that so quickly tears on a cheek become smiles on a child who receives and gives love. We too will be wonder-filled when we are with the children. We play, lift, comfort, heal, and study. Then God will be alive in our new ways of doing theology. Wonder-theology is summed up in the last stanza of ST Kimbrough, Jr.’s hymn, “Whose Child Is This?” “Once Jesus said, ‘Let all the children come to me.’ If you would heed this call, like Jesus you must be. Let all the children come to you—the least, the last, vast numbers, few. Our Savior bids you love them too. Each child is God’s child, yours and mine. You are a gift of love divine.”¹ □

¹Words © 1997 General Board of Global Ministries, GBGMusik, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115. Reprinted under License #2198. All rights reserved.



George W. Bashore is a retired bishop living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.