



EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY

As I listened to people, again and again, I was struck with the intrinsic shapeliness of our lives. I've explored the deep urge toward wholeness in my discussions of coherence, physiological covenants, the *aha* sensation, and coming into being. Joan Dalby Clift, when she talks about core images, suggests that these images, these recurrent symbols that are unique to an individual's life provide a structure to understand someone's spiritual development that may be more effective than applying broader schema. In writing and art, this approach would be similar to the emphasis on organic form, meaning there is an assumption that there *is* a form inherent in the experience, the image, that will shape itself independent of our willing. Our discipline allows us to foster that unfolding. It is the difference between imagining us to be raw clay and intricate living organisms. This approach, or belief, is in itself a theology of a kind, a God-supposing or God-knowing that invites us to meet in our own experience the major questions of any systematic theology.

In all our lives we have the experiential ground needed for us to sow these major questions I was presented by Dr. Bobbie Patterson as the scaffold for any systematic theology:

Who or what is God?

Who is humankind?

How and why are God and humankind connected?

What went wrong with the connection?

What were the consequences?

How do these consequences continue?

Where is the hope/salvation/new life?

How is that new life sustained and enriched?

The questions, even for the great theologians, arose from their own lives, as did their answers. The credibility of the answers is assessed by bringing them back into contact with life itself. Every great religious figure has asked these questions out of their own life—and taken these answers *back* into their

own life to test them. Our theologies, I would suggest, are always accountable to our lives, not the other way around. The largest question we must ask of them is if they allow us to love our neighbor as ourself. Do they allow us to stay faithfully connected to everything we know about life *and* about the Holy? Do they allow us to be—not just do—good? Do they allow us to experience love and to delight in our existence?

In our own ways, we are all systematic theologians. Life demands it. It might be helpful sometimes to think of these questions and how they have been posed in another person's life by life itself and the answers that have risen out of that life. As we listen to some very different spiritual journeys, let these questions resonate: Who or what is God to this person and how did they come to know this? What has it meant to this person to be human—what kind of pleasure, joy, suffering, confusion, injustice and privilege have made up their understanding of what it is to be fully human? How do their experience of God and of themselves intersect? Where and how has that relationship been disrupted? What were the consequences of this disruption for their faith? If their original faith left them, what came to take its place? What is the freedom and new life and coherence in this new faith? What fosters this new and richer connection? What threatens it?

GINGER HARGRAVES

Ginger Hargraves is an attractive, middle-aged housewife who lives with her husband and family in Greenville, South Carolina. She shyly agreed to meet with me at the request of Dr. Royce Short and her husband. We met at her large, immaculate, colonial style home in a suburb of Greenville. She showed me into a comfortable den and settled me on the generous sofa.

Her husband and her son Brian, twenty-three and in a wheelchair, came in to say good-bye as they headed to evening church services. She was fore-going them to talk with me.

She and her husband were both Bob Jones graduates and had worked on staff for ten years before moving to Pennsylvania for eighteen years. They had returned to Greenville seven years ago. The city had grown enormously in that time, she mentioned, but they had visited regularly during their time in Pennsylvania, so the shock on return wasn't too great.

In Pennsylvania, they had lived in a rural setting, between

Philadelphia and Reading. She had found it isolating; people were clannish. Here in Greenville there were many people who shared affiliations with them through their Bob Jones connection and their church.

Ginger grew up in rural Washington, first in a very small farming community, and then in a town of 25,000. In her small community, there were one Baptist, one Methodist, and one Presbyterian church.

Going to church was what we did. It was a way of life. It was fun. At vacation Bible school, they had competitions to keep you motivated. My mother would work all week to get ready for Sunday. There were seven children. Not that we had rules, it was just normal and what we did. Not just as a tradition. It was what we believed we should do because the Bible talks about gathering together with like believers.

From the point Ginger was saved, “the words of the Bible began taking root in my life and my desire was to obey God in His Word. I had no desire to seek out other people and their words. I was seeking God's Word.”

She has never questioned this allegiance. Indeed, she says that even though she wasn't as focused as a teenager as she is now, “I did make a decision as a teenager to give myself totally to the Lord—to follow and serve Him and you don't know what that is to be.”

Ginger consistently makes a distinction between tradition and making an active, intentional choice to align with God's Word as a way of life: “God's will is day by day. It is not in plans only, it is in accomplishment. It's in my responses—to my children, a phone call. And I know how He wants me to respond, because if I don't, He convicts me in my heart.” She goes on to say:

God is with me all the time. I can talk to God. I can say, “I need your help. I need your wisdom.” I can say, “God, I only have twenty minutes to get to the grocery store and back. Could you get me a parking place?” Sometimes it happens—and it just gives me a little encouragement that He is in control within every second of my life. The Bible says pray without ceasing. I think that is being in a state where you know you can pray at all times.

But above everything, Ginger's God is sovereign: *He is in control of everything. He always has been. He is holy and pure. He wants us conformed in His image, to be Christ-like and pursue holiness. This pursuit is by faith, not works. He knows everything. He is the creator and before the world He was. He is the beginning and the end. Everything*