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Eunuchs Because of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 19:12)

by Dale Allison

"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Matt. 19:12). This verse is not one of the more celebrated utterances of Jesus, and sermons on the text must be comparatively few and far between. There are at least two reasons for the lack of attention generally paid to the saying. First, the word "eunuch" which conjures up the image of a male being castrated, does not have pleasant connotations. It is not the sort of word one can freely utter in formal or polite company. Second, the suspicion or fear that Jesus' saying about eunuchs was intended to be taken literally has never been fully out of mind. Eusebius, in his history of the early church, reports that the great Origen, while yet a youth and full of religious zeal, performed the act of self-castration, thinking himself thereby to have fulfilled the command of the Lord (*H.E.* VI, 8); and, although Origen later interpreted the saying otherwise (as we know from his commentary on Matthew: 15,1 [PG 13, 1253]), a literal understanding of Matt. 19:12 has in fact cropped up from time to time: the deed of the youthful Alexandrian has had its imitators. Indeed, the situation in the early church was such that the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) found it necessary to address the problem of what to do with Christian ministers who had emasculated themselves; see the first canon.¹ So Christendom has had its reasons for not treasuring Matt. 19:12 as much as, let us say, John 3:16.

Despite this, it is unfortunate that our selected text has suffered the fate of obscurity. The verse is not all that difficult to comprehend; and it well illustrates a principle fundamental for all who would apprehend the true meaning of Christian service.

Eunuchs are rarely encountered in our society today. It was otherwise in the old world. The old world had its harems, and eunuchs were typically given charge over them. Thus it is that we read in the Bible, in 2 Kings 9:30-33, of the retinue that attended queen Jezebel. Eunuchs also frequently held official posts in the royal courts and helped conduct affairs of state. Acts 8:26-40 recounts the familiar story of the treasurer of the queen of the Ethiopians, a eunuch whom Stephen converted. And the Jewish historian Josephus informs us that three of the chamberlains of Herod the Great—his cupbearer, his steward, and his gentleman of the bedchamber—were eunuchs. Josephus writes: "There were certain eunuchs which the king had, and on account of their beauty was very fond of them; and the care of bringing him his drink was entrusted to one of them; of bringing him his supper, to another; and of putting him to bed, to the third, who [-and this is rather intriguing—] also managed the principal affairs of the government . . ." (*Ant.* XVI, 8. 1).

Although the self-gelding of devotees sometimes played a role in the cults of a few hellenistic religions, the thought of castration for any good purpose was foreign to the religious Jews of Jesus' time. Two facts in particular explain this—along with, one presumes, a natural repugnance felt for the mutilation of a healthy human body. To begin with, the Old Testament contains several prohibitions having to do with eunuchs. These are scarcely complimentary. Deut. 23:1, associating eunuchs with bastards, Ammorites, and Moabites, commands, "He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord." And Lev. 21:20 lays down the stricture that no descendant of Aaron with "a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles" could serve before the Lord at the holy altar. Even the castrated animal was deemed unfit for the Lord. Lev. 22:24, which the rabbis later took as a general prohibition of castration (see *b. Sabb.* 110b and *Sipre Lev.* on 22:24), declares, "Any animal which

has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the Lord or sacrifice within your land." The impact of such legislation on later generations was given expression by Josephus, who offered the following interpretative paraphrase of the commands in Lev. 21 and 22:

Let those that have made themselves eunuchs be had in detestation; and do you avoid any conversation with them who have deprived themselves of their manhood, and of that fruit of generation which God has given to men for the increase of their kind; let such be driven away, as if they had killed their children, since they beforehand have lost what should procure them; for it is evident that while their soul is effeminate, they have withal transfused that effeminacy to their body also. In like manner do you treat all that is of a monstrous nature when it is looked on; nor is it lawful to geld men or any other animals (*Ant.* IV, 8. 40; cf. *Ps.-Phoc.* 187).

A second factor which contributed to the abhorrence of castration was that: celibacy was almost universally frowned upon in Judaism. (This, by the way, is in interesting contrast to the two great religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism.) The Essenes who, according to Josephus, Philo, and Pliny the Elder, abstained from marriage, seem to have been pretty much alone in their abstinence. In fact, only a single rabbi, a certain Ben Azzai (of the second century A.D.), is known to have been celibate—and he was rebuked in the strongest terms by his fellows. Moreover, to Ben Azzai himself is attributed this saying: "He who does not see to the continuation and propagation of the race, may he be accounted by Scripture as if he diminished the divine image" (*y. Yeb.* 8, 4). Rabbinic Judaism taught that procreation was a duty and that the unmarried state was blameworthy. Had not God commanded Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28)? It is not difficult to collect rabbinic utterances extolling wives, the married state, and propagation. R. Tanhum is purported to have said in the name of R. Hanilai, "Any man who has not wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without gladness" (*b. Yeb.* 62b). According to a saying assigned to R. Eleazar, "A man who has not wife is no proper man; for it is said, Male and female he created them and called their name Adam" (*b. Yeb.* 63a). The same rabbi also reportedly said, "He who does not engage in the propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood; for it is said, Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed" (*b. Yeb.* 63b). R. Hama b. Hanina is recorded as saying, "As soon as a man takes a wife his sins are buried; for it is said, Whoso findeth a wife findeth a great good and obtaineth favor of the Lord" (*b. Yeb.* 63b). R. Helbo advised, "Be careful about the honour of your wife, for blessings rest on a man's house only because of his wife" (*b. B. Mes.* 59a). Finally, listen to this from an old rabbinic commentary on Genesis: "R. Jacob said, 'He who has no wife lives without good, or help, or joy, or blessing, or atonement.' R. Joshua of Sikhnin added in the name of R. Levi that he is also without life. R. Hiyya b. Gammada said that he is not really a complete man, and some say that he diminishes the divine likeness" (*Gen. R.* 17, 2).

Given what has been said up to now, and despite the tradition that Daniel was a eunuch (*Jos. Ant.* X, 10. 1; *b. Sanh.* 93b; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, on 15:5)² and the prophecy of Isa. 56:3-5, which foretells the acceptance of eunuchs into the congregation of Israel at the final redemption (cf. *Wisd.* 3:14), it was clearly no good thing for a Jew to be a eunuch. Indeed, eunuchs were sometimes the butt of derisive taunts or disparaging jokes. One of the most droll tales in the Talmud occurs in *b. Sanh.* 152a. It tells of a Sadducee, a eunuch, who runs into a bald rabbi. The eunuch, poking fun at the rabbi, asks how far it is to "Baldtown." The rabbi responds in kind: about as far as the distance to "Eunuchtown."

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Then the two trade barbs as to the relative worth of a castrated animal and a bald animal. Next the Sadducee, noting that the bald man is barefoot, composes a little saying. "He who rides on a horse is a king and upon an ass a free man, and he who has shoes on his feet is a human being; but he who has none of these, one who is dead and buried is better off." The bald man retorts, "O eunuch, o eunuch, you have enumerated three things to me; now you will hear three things: the glory of a face is its beard; the rejoicing of one's heart is a wife; and the heritage of the Lord is children; blessed be the Omnipresent, who has denied you all these!" Finally, the two call each other names—"quarrelsome baldhead" and "castrated buck"—and angrily depart company. This tale well illustrates how a eunuch, just like a bald man or any other human being who stands out as unusual or abnormal, could call forth ridicule.

It is something new. Presumably, then, the point of Matt. 19:12 rests with this third sort of eunuch. This presumption is wholly confirmed by an analysis of the structure of the saying.

IV

According to Prov. 17:3,
The crucible is for silver,
and the furnace is for gold;
and the Lord tries hearts.

The first two lines of this proverb relate concrete facts about the everyday world and serve to introduce or illustrate the third line, which proclaims a truth—much less concrete—from the religious sphere. Now this sequence of two lines about common concrete facts followed by a third line pertaining to the religious or moral

So-called natural "rights" are not infallible guides for the Christian disciple following Jesus.

In this connection, one more fact is to be noted. As might have been guessed, the word "eunuch," with its connotations of contempt and ridicule, was sometimes disparagingly applied to an unmarried or impotent male (see below, section III). In fact, if the words of R. Simeon b. Eleazar be any index, a single man with a high, feminine voice ran the risk of being labeled a congenital eunuch (*b. Yeb.* 80b). Furthermore—and this reminds one of how our own society stereotypes the homosexual—the Talmud (*ibid.*) states that, according to the rabbis, a eunuch could be recognized by a lack of beard, smooth skin, and lanky hair. The decidedly crude and pejorative force of the word "eunuch" is here in full evidence.

III

Having said a few words about eunuchs in ancient Jewish society, we may now turn our attention toward Matt. 19:12. The first thing to be said about the verse is that it is tripartite. Three different clauses tell us about three different types of eunuchs—those who have been eunuchs from the beginning of life, those who have been made eunuchs by men, and those who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. It is essential to realize that the first two kinds of eunuchs—those by birth and those by men—represent a standard categorization. According to the rabbis, there were two sorts of eunuchs, those of man's making and those of nature's making (see, for example, *m. Zab.* 2:1; *m. Yeb.* 8:4; *b. Yeb.* 75a, 79b). The first type was spoken of as being *srîs 'ādām*, literally, "eunuch of man." And the second type was spoken of as being *srîs hammâ*, literally, "eunuch of the sun," that is, a eunuch from the first seeing of the sun, a eunuch by birth (*b. Yeb.* 79b, 80a). The "eunuch of man" was a male who had either been literally castrated or who had, sometime after birth, lost the power to reproduce, whether through a disease, an injury, or some other debilitating factor. The "eunuch of the sun" was one who had been born with defective male organs or one who had otherwise been rendered impotent by the circumstances of his birth.³

The importance of the rabbinic terminology for Matt. 19:12 should be evident. The phrase, "eunuchs made eunuchs by men," is the equivalent of the stock expression, *srîs 'ādām*, "eunuch of man"; and the phrase, "eunuchs who have been so from birth," matches the rabbis' *srîs hammâ*, "eunuch of the sun."⁴ It follows that the first two lines of Jesus' saying simply set forth a once familiar classification and intend to call to mind recognized characters. Things are otherwise, however, with the third line. The eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven has no parallel in Jewish literature.

arena, occurs often in the book of Proverbs; we evidently have here to do with a pattern typical of the wisdom tradition. Prov. 20:15 reads:

There is gold,
and there is an abundance of costly stones;
but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.

Prov. 27:3 reads:

A stone is heavy,
and sand is weighty;
but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

Prov. 30:33 reads:

For pressing milk produces curds,
pressing the nose produces blood;
and pressing anger produces strife.

Jesus himself took up for his own purposes the pattern of speech we have just observed in Proverbs. In Matt. 8:20 he declares,

Foxes have holes,
and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Here, as with the earlier passages, two tangible facts about the known world serve as the background for the declaration of a moral or religious verity. Recall also Matt. 5:14–16, where Jesus speaks first about a city set on a hill, then secondly of a light under a bushel, and then, finally, exhorts his hearers to let their light shine before men. Matt. 12:25–26 is likewise relevant. Jesus observes in the first place that a kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and that, in the second place, no city or house divided against itself will stand; and that, in the third place, if Satan casts out Satan, his kingdom is divided against itself, so how will it then stand?

The text we are looking at in this paper, Matt. 19:12, offers yet one more example of the standard proverbial pattern:

There are eunuchs who have been so from birth,
and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men;
and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs
because of the kingdom of heaven.

This proverb or maxim mentions three types of eunuchs. The first two, as seen previously, are taken for granted: they are known entities. They thus serve to illustrate the third type of eunuch, which is novel. In other words, reference to eunuchs of birth and to eunuchs of men functions to introduce a new type of eunuch, that for the kingdom of heaven.

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Before proceeding any further with our interpretation of Matt. 19:12, it is necessary, for reasons soon to become evident, to consider the polemical context in which Jesus carried out his ministry.

Jesus was accused of being unlawfully impious, of breaking the Sabbath, of not fasting, and of being ritually unclean (Mark 2:18, 24; 3:2; 7:5). He was further called all sorts of names by his opponents, by those who found his words and actions offensive. He was labeled a blasphemer, a drunkard, and a glutton (Mark 2:7; 3:28; 14:64; John 10:33, 36; Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). People contemptuously declared that he was the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16; Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). It was even said—and surely this is the unsurpassed insult—that he had a demon and was in league with Beelzebul (Mark 3:22; Matt. 10:25). Clearly the adversaries of Jesus of Nazareth held no verbal punches in their attempt to stigmatize him and his work.

But Jesus seems to have been up for the fight. For in a way that reminds one of Paul,⁵ Jesus took up his opponents' accusations and adroitly employed them in his own defense. Having been called a glutton and a drunkard, Jesus responded thiswise: Yes, the Son of Man, whom you reject, did indeed come eating and drinking; but then John the Baptist, whom you also reject, came neither nor drinking, and you say that he had a demon. So then what difference does it make? "We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn" (Matt. 11:17; Luke 7:32).

There are additional texts which show us that Jesus did not ignore the biting remarks directed against him, that he rather tried to blunt their force by doing something positive with them. For example, Jesus acknowledged that he was, in truth, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But to this admission he added that he had come to call not the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17), and also that tax collectors and sinners were going to go into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and scribes (Matt. 21:31). Again, when it was said that his power to cast out evil spirits and to heal the sick derived not from the Spirit of God, that he expelled demons only by the prince of demons, Jesus did not simply let the accusation pass by without comment. Instead he pointedly asked, "If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matt. 12:27; Luke 11:19).

With all this in mind, we may now return to Matt. 19:12. There must have been a very good reason why Jesus, in a seemingly unprecedented, even bizarre manner, used the offensive word "eunuch," in a positive fashion, in association with the kingdom of heaven. Can we guess that reason? I think we can. Given that Jesus was unmarried,⁶ given that the unmarried state was widely held by Jews to be dishonorable, given that the word "eunuch" was sometimes abusively directed towards unmarried men, given that Jesus was often viciously maligned by his opponents, and given that Jesus frequently picked up on the names he was called to turn them around for some good end, it seems probable enough that Matt. 19:12 was originally a response to the jeer that Jesus was a "eunuch."⁷

Jesus was a controversial public figure with his fair share of foes, foes who, according to the testimony of our sources, eagerly sought opportunity to hurl abuse. They found, it seems, such opportunity in the fact that Jesus had remained, against the usual Jewish custom, unmarried. And accordingly they smeared him with the derogatory word "eunuch." But just as he made the best of the other slanders his adversaries tossed at him—glutton, drunkard, blasphemer, friend of tax collectors and sinners—so Jesus, when tagged a "eunuch," composed around that crude word a little proverbial saying vindicating his celibacy: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven."

If we have rightly discerned the genesis of Matt. 19:12, the gist of the verse should now be plain. In the world at large there are two types of eunuchs, those made by men and those made by nature. But, so Jesus proclaims, there is also a third type, a type accounted for only by religion, the eunuch because of the kingdom of heaven. Men of this type are neither literal castrates nor impotent by nature, neither eunuchs by birth nor eunuchs made eunuchs by

men. They are, indeed, unmarried, not because they cannot take a wife but rather because they will not—because the duty placed upon them by the kingdom of heaven is such that it is best discharged outside the confines of marriage. For these men, the good and valuable thing that marriage undoubtedly is must necessarily be turned down, surrendered in view of the demand made upon them by something even greater.

It is here worth comparing St. Paul's attitude, as it was voiced in 1 Cor. 7 and 9. The apostle knew that he—like the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas—had the right to be accompanied by a wife (9:5). And yet he had not, he boasted, made use of that right, for in his case it would only have been an obstacle in the way of the gospel (9:12). Paul evidently believed that, at least in his own case, it was expedient not to marry. While he might have enjoyed a wife, and while he certainly had the right to have one, his own particular calling would only have suffered if he had had to bear the anxieties and responsibilities of married life. His goals were such that they compelled full focused attention on the affairs of the Lord (cf. 7:32–35). In a similar fashion, that is, with reference to his particular mission, Jesus also justified his own celibacy. Because of the kingdom and what it so urgently demanded of him, he could not but give himself to it utterly, and that excluded the course of taking a wife. In other words, Jesus was a eunuch because of the kingdom of heaven.

VI

In Mark 10:2–9 we read that Jesus said, "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." From this statement we learn that our Lord held a very high view of marriage, that he taught it to be an institution divinely ordained. It would seem to follow that Matt. 19:12 should not be taken as a denigration of the married state; otherwise, the saying on eunuchs would stand in conflict with the high endorsement of marriage enunciated in Mark 10:2–9. But if Matt. 19:12 does not entail that marriage is some kind of inferior state, what does it entail? Perhaps this question is best answered if we reflect for a bit on the idea of sacrifice. True sacrifice does not mean the giving up of luxuries. It means instead the giving up of good and needful things, things from God himself, things we think of as ours by "right." Sacrifice cancels out the notion that what we have should be dictated in the first place by that to which we think ourselves, as human beings, entitled. So-called natural "rights" are not infallible guides for the Christian disciple following Jesus. Even if traceable to the hand of God himself, such "rights" and reasonable human expectations must sometimes be canceled for those whose lives are given over to the cause of Jesus. For example, marriage is ordained by God as the natural, normal state for the members of our species; and those who marry in the Lord do so with the Lord's blessing. So one could justly claim—as did Paul in 1 Cor. 9:5—that a man has a so-called "right" to take a spouse. Nevertheless, it is also true that there are those—and Jesus and Paul were among them—who should not make use of that right, for what they are compelled to do because of the kingdom of heaven would not be well served by marriage (cf. 1 Cor. 9:12). In other words, the commitments imposed by certain Christian vocations may sometimes disallow the enjoyment of gifts intended by God for human beings in general.

Now most of us, as a matter of fact, have not been called to give up marriage. This fact, however, scarcely sets us free to ignore the principle behind Matt. 19:12. For marriage is not the only good thing that the Christian may be called to sacrifice. There are, in fact, some good things that all of us, at least from time to time, are called to give up. For instance, food is from God and all of us must eat—and yet it is sometimes, as at Lent, expedient to fast. Similarly, we all have the need to acquire various material goods and services, and therefore we all have the need for money; yet sometimes the call of Jesus will mean the sacrifice to wealth, in part or in whole (Mark 10:17–31). Again, sleep is needful, yet sometimes it is better to pray than to shut the eyes and dream. Our religion is a religion of sacrifice. And every one of us—not just those dubbed "eunuchs

because of the kingdom of heaven"—is called, because of the demand of God's kingdom, to suffer the loss of certain goods. What particular goods any particular individual will be called to sacrifice is something that cannot be decided in the abstract; it is something that appears to the individual only as the Christian life is lived out rightly. But it remains true, it is a Christian rule, that all of us will be called to sacrifice things we treasure.

One final point: Jesus was a "eunuch for the kingdom of heaven"; that is, he sacrificed the good of marriage because the kingdom required it of him. But marriage is not the only thing that Jesus sacrificed. At the heart of all Christian faith is this: Jesus sacrificed his very life. Now surely if anything is ours by "right," it is life itself. But this was precisely what Jesus was called to hand over. Life, the gift of God we value most, the gift that makes everything else possible—that is what Jesus gave away. So Jesus must be seen as the one who made the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice which symbolizes and sums up all other sacrifices. And he thereby becomes our model. Like him we too are to offer sacrifice: *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ. Not, of course, that any of us are likely to be called to martyrdom—or even to abstain from marriage for that matter. But we are all called to enter into the sacrificial spirit of Jesus, the spirit which could give up not only marriage but even life itself. We must learn to see that our so-called "rights" are not the ultimate reference point. Jesus justified his celibacy with these words: "because of the kingdom of heaven." The thought behind these words also led him to his death. And the same thought must direct the course that our lives take. As we progress along the pilgrim's path, these words, "because of the kingdom of heaven," which demand nothing less than painful but whole-hearted sacrifice, are to be our signpost.⁸

¹ "If any one has been obliged to undergo a surgical operation from disease, or has been castrated by barbarians, let him continue in the clergy. But if any one in good health has so mutilated himself, it is right that, if he be enrolled amongst the clergy, he should cease from his ministrations; and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. As, however, it is

plain that this is said with reference to those who dare to mutilate themselves, therefore, if any persons have been so mutilated by barbarians, or by their own masters, and in other respects are found worthy, the canon allows them to be admitted to the clerical office." Compare with this the *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 47, 21–24.

² A comparison of Isa. 39:7 and 2 Kgs. 20:18 with Dan. 1:1–3 shows why Daniel and his associates were thought to have been eunuchs. Incidentally, this conclusion did not set well with everybody. How could the great Daniel have been a eunuch? Would Scripture have recounted the shame of the righteous (cf. b. *Sanh.* 93b)? Some rabbis affirmed that the fiery furnace had been an instrument of healing and restoration (y. *Sabb.* 6, 9) or (by a far-fetched exegesis) that the eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon (Isa. 39:7; 2 Kgs. 20:18) were not Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego but Babylonian idols; for idol worship became "sterilized" in the days of Daniel (b. *Sanh.* 93b). Note also the first century A.D. *Liv. Pro. Dan.* 2 ("in his manhood he was chaste, so that the Jews thought him a eunuch").

³ The rabbis were concerned to make the distinction between the eunuch of the sun and the eunuch of man because they believed that certain prohibitions applied to one type but not the other; see, for example, m. *Yeb.* 8:4 and b. *Yeb.* 80b.

⁴ So also H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, vol. I (München, 1926), 805–807. Against C. Daniel, "Esseniens et eunuques (Mt 19,10–12)," *Revue de Qumran* 6 (1967–69), 353–90, "eunuchs made eunuchs by men" are hardly to be identified with the Qumran Essenes, who otherwise play no role in the gospel tradition.

⁵ See esp. 2 Cor. 10:1, 10; 11:6 and 29 and the context of these verses.

⁶ A few, of course, have argued that Jesus was married; e.g. W. A. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* (New York, 1970). But against this, Paul, in 1 Cor. 9, 5, refers to the fact that the rest of the apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas have wives; Jesus he does not mention. But he certainly would have done so in this context if he had known that Jesus had been married.

⁷ Credit for this insight apparently goes to J. Blinzler, "Eisin eunouchoi. Zur Auslegung von Mt. 19,12," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 48 (1957), 254–70. He has been followed by many, including T. Matura, "Le célibat dans le Nouveau Testament d'après l'exégèse récente," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 107 (1975), 481–500; J. Kodell, "The Celibacy Logion in Matthew 19,12," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 8 (1978), 19–23; and F. J. Moloney, "Matthew 19,3–12 and Celibacy. A Redactional and Form Critical Study," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979), 42–60. Blinzler's interpretation (and ours) presupposes, obviously, that Matt. 19.12 goes back to Jesus. For the claim that it does not, that Matt. 19.12 is instead a redactional formulation of the first evangelist, see R. H. Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982), 381–83. Gundry's argument, based solely upon word statistics, is unconvincing. Among other things, Justin Martyr (*Apol.* I, 15.4) seems to preserve a version independent of Matthew; see J. Blinzler, "Justinus Apol. I,15,4 und Matthäus 19,11–12," in *Mélanges bibliques en hommage au R. P. Bédaride Rigaux*, ed. A. Descamps and A. de Halleux (Gembloux, 1970), 44–55.

⁸ We have herein been concerned only with Matt. 19.12 as a word of Jesus; its interpretation by Matthew has not been within our purview. Nonetheless, we should perhaps mention that there are two very different ways of approaching Matt. 19.12 within its present context. According to the traditional interpretation, the verse has to do with those who have never been married. That is, it is a general call to consecrated celibacy (cf. 1 Cor. 7:25–39). For this position see the articles of Matura and Kodell cited in note 7. But 19.12 has also been understood as an integral part of 19.1–12: the eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven are those who have become divorced (cf. 19.1–9), and they are to remain single. So Jacques Dupont, *Marriage et divorce dans l'évangile. Matthieu 19,3–12 et parallèles* (Bruges, 1959), 161–222; Q. Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1966), 335–58; and Gundry, *Matthew*, 382–83.

Theological Soul-Searching In The United Church Of Christ

by Gabriel Fackre

Some call the mood one of "ferment" (President of the UCC), others "turbulence" (*Seventh Angel*), still others a challenge to the "theological disarray" in the United Church of Christ (*Christianity Today*).

The theological dynamisms current in the UCC make it a laboratory for learning how a Church can both be open to the mandates of mission and unity and at the same time preserve its theological identity and some doctrinal coherence. The denomination—a conjunction of four somewhat diverse streams of Protestantism—Congregational, Christian, German, Swiss and Hungarian Reformed, and the part-Lutheran and part-Reformed Evangelical Synod of North America—has grown up in the twenty-seven years of its life in the midst of major theological and social upheavals. Reflecting its origins and formative years, the UCC has been deeply involved in social issues, open to cultural questions, an advocate of justice for marginalized groups and active in peace movements. These diversities and directions have brought the charge that the Church in its national expression is essentially a social action group, subject to the influence of one or another current ideology, and that its local congregations are the home of "a pallid but personable faith" (*Time*).

How to hold together the "world-formative" (N. Wolterstorff) character of its Reformed tradition, and the world-drenched nature of its recent history, with its historic rootage in scriptural authority and creedal and covenantal bonding—that is the question. Right now the UCC is in the middle of this kind of serious soul-searching.

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What follows is a chronicle of that quest from the perspective of one participant-observer.

Post-60s Searchings

The present self-inquiry has long roots. From the beginning, these heirs of Jonathan Edwards, the Mercersburg theology and the Niebuhr brothers have never been devoid of theological concern, as evidenced by the widely used Statement of Faith of 1959, thoughtful Christian education programs, liturgically rich worship books, and strong ecumenical involvement, all concurrent with a passionate social witness.

However, signs of burnout after the activist 60s, concern about the reduction of mission to only its deed dimension, and worry about the acculturation of its message brought the beginnings of a new theological agenda. The meaning of mission became a natural early focal point. The Board for World Ministries began to explore its understanding of mission with a task force inquiry on evangelism, and the development of a statement of its dual nature as deed and word. In a similar vein, the Board for Homeland Ministries, having declined to participate in the nationwide Key 73 evangelism campaign, held a summer conference at Deering, New Hampshire in 1972 to examine its responsibilities in sharing the faith. Participants seized the initiative and produced the Deering Statement of Commitment that fused the social imperatives of the 60s with the faith sharing mandates of the 70s. Influenced by current action-reflection modes of theology, the Statement spoke of word in deed, the word of faith linked inextricably with deeds of mercy and justice. This grassroots movement, supported by BHM resources, developed extensive materials and training programs using "story" as its the-