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Some Musings about Theology, Christology and Organizations

DICK BROHOLM

What follows is a continuation of a simulated dialogue between myself and STW colleagues begun in the first paper “The Formative, Early History of Seeing Things Whole and Its Guiding Core Assumptions”

In this dialogue for shorthand purposes I will again be designated as DB and all of my colleagues by a common voice, COLeagues

COL: I’m not quite sure where we left off when we took that **long** bathroom break? Oh yes! I was puzzling over why you chose the three fold office of Christ as the jumping off place to create a theology of institutions?

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DB: We were influenced, I am sure, by Gabe Fackre who was a member of the task force and had been a significant theological resource to the work of the Center from the beginning. Earlier he had written an essay printed by the Center, Christ's Ministry And Ours in which he used the threefold office as a way to interpret and illumine the workplace ministry of Christian laity. But even given that influence, when the task force began meeting we actually looked at several different entry points and it was only after lengthy conversation that we all agreed the model of the threefold office seemed the most promising point of departure.

Gabe articulated a rationale for why the threefold office made sense and the important theological questions it poses. He suggested that:

1. For ecumenical Christianity, Christ's incarnation in ministry has been understood and interpreted in terms of the threefold work or office of Christ. So if one goal of this work is to engage the Church in thinking theologically about institutions and their ministry or service, there is already a significant body of work that can be addressed and an audience primed to listen.
2. Calvin used the threefold office to describe the nature and ministry of one institution, the Church. So here is a window of opportunity for thinking theologically about institutions. (The obvious critical question is: can we make a case for correlating theological insights about the church as an institution to so-called "secular" institutions?)
3. Gabe said there is also a tradition and some writing, albeit limited in scope and attention, that took the Reformation tradition and its interpretation of the threefold office and applied it to the secular presence and ministry of Christ. This tradition goes back to the Heidelberg catechism on the three-fold ministry of the laity and currently is found in Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. So once again here was a possible foundation, that already had some standing and acceptance in ecumenical circles, on which we could build.

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4. But perhaps the most compelling argument for Gabe took its cue from Paul's Colossian letter and comes down to whether or not we are committed to try and think Christologically about mission and ministry in the world. He asked, "Do we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of creation in its entirety? And, if we do, what are the implications of that confession for our understanding of Christ's Lordship in the world of organizations?"

COL: Mercy! Enough! I see now where you were taking your cues from the theological tradition. You still haven't convinced me that the concept of Christ's threefold office is the way to go however. My reservations have less to do with continuity with theological tradition and more to do with concerns for whether this particular tradition is both **accessible** and **relevant**.

My concern around **accessibility** relates to my strong sense that the notion of Christ's threefold office represents an emphasis that is largely unfamiliar to many of the essential participants on our ongoing conversation. Only those who bring significant theological training to the dialogue will find it useful. Most of my friends who are serious about their faith and fluent in its language give me blank stares when I mention the threefold office. It's an obscure notion. If our hope in this work is to be reflecting theologically with people of faith whose expertise lies in their training and experience with organizations and institutions, don't we need to be concerned about joining the conversation from our end with images that are more familiar and accessible? For instance, you mentioned earlier the image of the Body of Christ. Why not that? So, that's my concern around accessibility.

My question around **relevance** has to do with whether a historical theological tradition like the three-fold office of Christ can really speak meaningfully to the complex realities of contemporary organizations? I am worried that this emphasis on the threefold office puts the whole weight of the dialogue on the side of theology and not on the side of organizational theory and practice.

I think I could be persuaded about this theological approach, if I could be sure that it works organizationally; that it isn't a force fit.

DB: Fair enough. Let me speak first to your second question—the question of relevance. Because I don't believe any of these arguments would have ultimately prevailed to keep us

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working on this tack over these years if, early on, we hadn't discovered some promising correlations between the threefold office and the life and nature of organizations.

Fairly early in the life of the Center's task force on a theology of institutions, I was re-reading some of the research carried on 10 years earlier in MAP where we had been trying to illumine the role of institutional change agents. I re-discovered that in the early '70's the MAP staff had identified three corporate values which, when held in creative tension, seemed to capture the essential nature of any institution. We defined them back then as:

Corporate Wholeness = Concern for the quality of life within the institution reflecting how well the institution meets the full range of human and material needs of those who constitute its work force.

Corporate Accountability = Concern for the way in which the institution attempts to serve the needs of the larger society through the services or products it provides.

Corporate Effectiveness = Concern for how well the institution stewards the human and material resources in its possession.

In MAP these three criteria served as a rather rough attempt to get at the dynamics of institutional decision-making and the issue of corporate responsibility. We had no idea back then that we might also be dealing with the content of the three fold office of Christ.

When the Center's task force examined this material ten years later they immediately began to make rough correlations between these three values and the three offices of Christ (eg. the prophetic office with corporate accountability, the priestly office with corporate wholeness and the royal office with corporate effectiveness).

Further, as we reflected back on Douglas Sherwin's insights regarding a business as a "system of interdependent members that can thrive only when all members are given equal emphasis" we sensed we were dealing with a dynamically integrated model for understanding and creatively resolving the legitimate and inevitable tensions that are present inside any organization. With all its limitations and imperfections I believe the three-fold office of Christ and its organizational correlations holds real promise for understanding the nature of organizations and what constitutes their faithful service. At least that is the principal assumption on which we are working and which we are attempting to refine and test.

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COL: What you have shared raises a multiple of questions for me, but it also provokes some additional connections and points of correlation. For example, it made me think of Russell Ackoff's writing on system's theory. As you know, Ackoff is the father of operations research and one of the first contributors to the development of systems thinking. He once proposed the theorem "If you take a system and take it apart to identify its components, and then operate those components in such a way that every component behaves as well as it possibly can, there is one thing of which you can be sure....the system as a whole will not behave as well as it can. The counter-intuitive corollary is this: if you have a system that is behaving as well as it can, none of its parts will be."

Ackoff's theorem helped me grasp not only the interdependent nature of an organizational system, but the necessity of tension within the system as each part has to accommodate, hopefully creatively, to the needs and perspectives of the other parts. As I understand what he is saying no one part can dictate how the other parts must respond without damage to the system as a whole. Therefore, my assumption is that the task of balancing the legitimate but competing interests of each of the parts of the system (whether they be different stakeholder groups or specific functions or offices within the organization) is what lies at the heart of institutional effectiveness or as you might say "institutional faithfulness"

DB: That certainly is counter-intuitive but I believe our experience confirms the truth of it. That is why we have postulated that institutional faithfulness may not result so much from attempting to solve a problem by searching for and implementing the "perfect" or morally right answer which fully satisfies the concerns and meets the interests of each office and its stakeholders. Rather, faithfulness may more likely be the outcome when we attempt to "see things whole" to use a phrase of Bob Greenleaf's and work for a solution that respects and relates the needs and interests of each office to the other two. This will probably mean that the solution will not fully satisfy the legitimate needs of any one office (ie. "the parts will not be able to function as well as they possibly can"). But it does suggest that by creatively holding the interests of each office together and insisting that any 'solution' must not allow the interests of any one office to overwhelm and dominate, the total system (organization) and each of its parts will be better served and better able to serve.

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COL: I hear you proposing that tension and conflict stand at the heart of faithfulness for an organization in that three basic values, needs, “offices”, or whatever we call them are by their very nature in tension or conflict with each other? Does the theological tradition around the threefold office of Christ acknowledge there is a tension within Him, as well?

DB: That’s a great question and I don’t know what the answer is. We should press Gabe on this. What I do know is that the history of the Jewish nation was filled with tension and conflict between the priests, prophets and kings. I also wonder if one couldn’t interpret the story of the temptation of Jesus at the start of his ministry within the model of these three “offices” and the tension that exists between them?

On a somewhat different tack, in our effort to relate the theological tradition of the three fold office to the way “secular” folk might think about and understand their organizations, I would like to add another triadic theory or model. Murray Bowen, who is reputed to be the father of systems theory as it pertains to the field of psychotherapy and family systems, has developed an insightful clinical theory based on his observations that the triangle, a three person emotional configuration, is the basic building block of any emotional system.

He contends that a two-person system is stable only as long as it is calm and not under stress. But when anxiety increases, a two-person system immediately involves a third person and becomes a triangle. He said, *“A Triangle is a natural way of being for people. It is not inaccurate to think of the triangle as a failure in a two-person relationship, but that is a narrow view of the larger relationship system. When anxiety is low and external conditions are ideal, the back and forth flow in a twosome can be calm and comfortable. One could refer to this as the ideal or the normal state for a two person relationship. However, the human situation does not remain ideal for long, even under the best conditions when both people are fairly stable. The two person relationship is unstable in that it has a low tolerance for anxiety and it is easily disturbed by emotional forces within the twosome and by relationship forces from the outside. When anxiety increases the emotional flow within a twosome intensifies and the relationship becomes uncomfortable. When the intensity reaches a certain level ...the twosome predictably involves a third person.”*

I’m not sure I am doing justice to his ideas, but what was striking to me in his theory is the conviction that the triangle is more stable and flexible than a twosome. It has a much higher tolerance for anxiety and is capable of handling a fair percentage of life’s stresses.

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COL: This poses an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, in our three-fold office model we seem to be saying that the three offices and their interests are likely to be in tension with each other and that faithfulness is marked by how well these conflicting interests are held in creative balance. But Bowen seems to be suggesting that the triangle is a stable answer to the basic instability of a dyad or twosome.

DB: I'm not sure that the two theories or models are necessarily incompatible. I think it is possible to acknowledge the inevitable tension that exists between three different ways of seeing a problem or an organization and, at the same time, believe that by holding these three perspectives in creative tension we are more likely to experience and produce a healthy system or organization.

COL: As you were sharing this I immediately thought of Buckminster Fuller, the architect and city planner, who believes that the triangle or pyramidal form of the triangle is the most stable of building forms and capable of carrying significant loads.

DB: Maybe that is what we are being compelled to understand; that the threefold office is ultimately stable and capable of carrying enormous loads (ie. the health and well-being of the organization and those it seeks to serve!).

COL: In our reflection on tension and conflict between the offices are we in danger of a fairly benign view of organizations? What about the truly demonic in organizational life; those institutions which intentionally set out to destroy and diminish however they may attempt to cloak or disguise the true intent of their action? How do we factor evil demonic organizations into our theory or even the evil that well-intentioned institutions perform?

DB: I think your question is right on target and we've got to deal with that reality if the model is to have any credibility. But in doing so I would plead that we might treat or seek to understand sinful and corrupt institutions in the same way theologically that we attempt to understand and minister to sinful and corrupt people. If Christ's reconciling and redeeming

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love carries the cosmic implications I believe are present in the Apostle Paul's theology, then I believe institutions are also under this mandate and included in this hopeful reality.

COL: Walter Wink can be an enormous resource to us at this point. His trilogy on the powers and principalities — particularly his third volume Engaging the Powers . Here he addresses at length the challenge of just this: the struggle to faithfully engage the Powers in their fallenness. His choice of the word **engaging** in the title was not a casual one, I think. Originally he had planned to entitle the volume *Confronting the Powers* because, as the volume's subtitle suggests ("*Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination.*") he is concerned about the serious business of confronting demonic powers. Wink, as I understand him, came instead to frame the challenge as that of "engaging" these Powers in their fallenness out of his conviction that our wrestling would be most faithful if it was formed deeply by an awareness that they were, in the first place, created good, and will, in the last place, be once again redeemed so that they resume their rightful place in God's created order.

In this spirit, while we may well feel compelled to resist the powers and principalities in their more evil or fallen expressions, it can never be with the goal of annihilating them. Rather the images of this resistance have more to do with intercession. Our intercessions against-and-on-behalf-of the fallen powers will include prayer ("*permitting God to act without violating human freedom*") as well as other, more activist interventions including nonviolent struggle, challenging existing policies or posing value-based alternatives, loving the enemy, exorcism, mediating, conversion and healing.

In all of this, however, Wink cautions us that we must act with an awareness that it is God who is the original intervener and intercessor. In all of this we are joining with God ... "*in a prayer that is already going on in us and in the world.*"

DB: Let me make sure I'm hearing you correctly. Wink is not saying that because God is active, we don't need to be, is he?

COL: No, not at all! What I understand him to be doing is to remind us that God has not left us clueless in this challenge of faithfully engaging our institutions. Rather, in looking toward God as we search for clues about what the shape of our own faith interventions

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might be, we are made mindful of at least a couple of things. One is that the goal of our interventions as agents of change is not to destroy the Powers, but rather their conversion...of calling them back to their rightful role as servants of God's purposes in Creation. The other is that we have neither the first nor the last word. Rather, our role is perhaps more helpfully understood as that of offering intercessory words and deeds that open up space for God to act.

DB: The notion of interceding on behalf of organizations is compelling for me. It seems to fit our effort to develop a model or way of thinking and acting in organizations that is theologically informed and illumined. But it also leads to more questions. For instance, where does the life and ministry of Jesus fit into this way of thinking?

COL: In some ways, Jesus is a model of lived intercession...a life that radically submitted itself so as to create for God a dramatic opportunity to act in the world without violating human freedom. Jesus offers us vital, albeit sobering clues, about how to open up space for God to intervene in the world.

DB: I'm intrigued by what you and Wink are proposing. How does it connect to the threefold office of Christ?

COL: My sense of the threefold office is that it is the Church's attempt to theologically describe and interpret the shape and significance of Jesus' intercessory life and ministry. He thus becomes our reference point for understanding our roles as "organizational intercessors".

DB: I feel this is a really promising idea, but that we have only begun to scratch the surface. Before we begin to limit ourselves to the theology surrounding the three-fold office I'd also like to suggest that the current historical studies on the life and mission of Jesus are a promising source of fresh insight in our work.

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COL: Whoa! Do I hear you backing away from the three-fold model and the theology that informs it?

DB: Yes and No. I think the three-fold model will continue to be a significant resource in our work and thinking, but I also don't believe it is exhaustive and the only frame of reference that can inform our goal of developing a theology of organizations; a way of thinking about faithful organizational leadership.

COL: I'm intrigued and a little surprised. Say more.

DB: The theology we have drawn upon in developing the three-fold model was shaped historically by a particular Christology that had its roots in the way Calvin interpreted the significance of the life and mission of Jesus.

The work done by Jesus scholars over the last few decades opens up other ways of thinking about the life and mission of Jesus that I find especially intriguing. I didn't grow up, as Paul did, in a religious culture that was steeped in the idea of a perfect sacrifice to atone for one's sins. So while I can understand the logic of Atonement that just isn't the kind of Christology that speaks deeply to me about God's call to faithfulness.

COL: Say more.

DB: I have recently been reading a book by Stephen Patterson, a member of the Jesus Seminar, called **The God of Jesus**. Patterson invites the reader to pursue the question: "What was Jesus own theology?" He writes "It is striking to notice how seldom this question is posed in the literature about Jesus. In the older literature it is supplanted by the question of Jesus' own self-understanding, his 'messianic consciousness' or the nature of his unique relationship with God. But these are not questions of theology. They have to do, rather, with Christology, a subject which—so most historians today would agree—was not a question for Jesus himself. It was the early church which supplied this interest, as it reflected on the theological significance of what it had experienced in the words and deeds of Jesus...It was not by accident, however, that the early church eventually gave expression to this implicit

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theology using christological categories, speaking of Jesus using terms like “Messiah”, “Lord”, “Savior”, “Son of God” suggesting that in Jesus’ words and deeds people had experienced God in a decisive way.”

COL: I’m not sure where you’re going with this?

DB: I’m not so sure myself, but hang in with me. Patterson says” To ask about Jesus’ own theology is to ask first about the experience itself, not the response to it. What is the character of God that comes to expression in Jesus’ words and deeds. What did Jesus believe to be true about God that led him to speak of God’s Empire in the way that he did?” ...”In speaking of God’s Empire as a present reality, already potentially present, Jesus gave expression to the idea that God is not remote, but directly involved in the lives of ordinary people.” (We might add “and the institutions people lead, work in, and are affected by).

I believe we are at a unique moment in the world’s history where we are attempting to recover the Biblical truth that we, all, are called to faithful ministry and that, for most of us, that ministry will be primarily lived out in the so-called “secular” organizations that are shaping the future of our society and our world. In the words of the Apostle Paul, if Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” I believe a reexamination of the life and teachings of Jesus as seen through the eyes of today’s Biblical scholars can become a renewed way of “seeing things whole”. I believe we need to re examine and read the Gospel narratives with the lenses of the 21st century in order to discover the good news that God is speaking to us today and, perhaps, even better understand how it was good news for those early Christians in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Instead of trying to become faithful 1st century followers of the Way, I believe we need to take much more seriously the fresh way God is speaking to us today through that 1st century experience.

COL: This sounds rather confusing. Are you suggesting that within STW we should be doing Bible study through the lens of our contemporary experience in organizations using the best of current Biblical scholarship?

DB: Yes and No. I believe the genius of STW’s work is its earnest effort to speak in non-religious language deeply important religious truths. But to keep those ‘truths’ fresh and

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faithful, some within STW need to feel the call to keep connecting the work to the best of our heritage as Christians and keep drawing on those insights which emerge from the intersection of faith and practice. I think some of our best moments as an organization have come when, in retreat, we have examined side by side a particular passage of scripture and the living history of a specific organization. All I would like to add to that mix is that some within STW see their calling as one of re-engaging the best of current Biblical scholarship to freshly re-think what it means to be a faithful community today. I believe Patterson is on to something when he suggests we examine Jesus' theology and not move too quickly to Christological conclusions.

COL: My head is spinning, but I'm also intrigued and engaged. Perhaps the next step before we head home is to explore just how this could take place.