Saving faith, evangelical witness: Gauging Brian Gerrish

by William C. Placher in the April 5, 2000 issue

Saving and Secular Faith: An Invitation to Systematic Theology, by B.A. Gerrish
The Pilgrim Road: Sermons on Christian Life, by B.A. Gerrish; edited by Mary T. Stimming

As I read these two books by Brian Gerrish, I had three reactions in turn: first, I marveled at what a wonderful scholar and theologian he is; second, I realized how much I disagree with him on several points; third, I was surprised at how little those disagreements seem to matter when reading his wonderful sermons.

Gerrish has moved from the University of Chicago, where he held the Nuveen Professorship (whose previous occupants had been Paul Tillich and Paul Ricoeur) to Union Seminary in Richmond, where he is Distinguished Service Professor of Theology. His many publications on Reformation and 19th-century theology (above all, on Calvin and Schleiermacher) are models of rich scholarship, elegant prose and reflection on the history of theology with an eye to how it matters for church life today.

In *Saving and Secular Faith* Gerrish turns his focus from history to constructive theology. He offers an introduction to the task of theology centered on the concept of faith, considering that concept in dialogue with psychologists, historians of religion and sociologists, as well as with the history of theology. Faith, he says, is obviously “one of the key words in the language of the Christian community.” But, starting with the Bible itself, it has two meanings: assent or belief, and trust. Emphases can vary—more on assent in Aquinas and more on trust in Luther, for instance—but Gerrish admits that he has come to see fewer and fewer differences between Protestant and Catholic perspectives. He calls this trusting assent at the core of Christian life “saving faith.”

One of the book’s central claims is that this “saving faith” is but one species of a genus “faith” to be found in other religions and indeed in all human activities.

Gerrish rather awkwardly (as he admits) lumps Muslim, Buddhist and nonreligious faith into the category of “secular faith.” Scientists, for instance, have faith “that observations made on Monday yield data our research can use on Tuesday and a discovery made in Cambridge will hold good in Göttingen or Chicago.”

Indeed, everybody holds certain principles of “elemental faith”: for example, that the world has some kind of order to it, and that we have some kind of moral responsibility. Elemental faith and other forms of secular faith provide “points of contact” for Christians trying to explain saving faith. The content of our faith is different from yours, we can say to skeptics—but don’t pretend that we have faith and you don’t, or that having faith is in principle a bad idea.

Christian theologians explore their faith within a particular community and tradition, though “keeping faith with tradition . . . is not at all being bound by the letter of the law; it is more a matter of the company you keep—or the books you reach for first—when you want to do your best thinking.” But contemporary Christian theologians also operate in a particular historical context, and that makes for some differences. At one point Gerrish summarizes saving faith as the “construal of the story of Jesus, and therefore of our own story, as the work of a parentlike God who means us well, and in whom we accordingly place our trust.”

Today such faith faces at least two new sorts of problems related to “the uniqueness of Christ and the historical reliability of the Gospels,” Gerrish argues. We find ourselves in conversation with adherents of other religions, and the question whether Christ is the only way to God inevitably arises. We also encounter the works of historians who reach a wide range of conclusions about Jesus, including skepticism. Does saving faith have to wait until they agree on an answer?

According to Gerrish, “To say that the Christian receives saving faith through the New Testament image of Jesus need not imply that faith cannot be had in any other way, or that no other religious faiths convey salvation.” We trust in what Christ has done for us, and we can enter openly into dialogue with non-Christians about what has transformed their lives. As Gerrish puts it in one of the sermons collected in *The Pilgrim Road*, “The Creator must love variety, since the world is so full of it. We are summoned to be loyal to the best we know and to bear faithful witness to it. We are not required to deny that the eternal goodness we believe in may reach out to others in other ways.”

Knowing what our encounter with the New Testament picture of Christ has done in our own lives, we can be agnostic about the degree to which that image corresponds to historical reality. Gerrish quotes the blind man from John 9: he does not know just who this Jesus is, he tells his suspicious questioners, but “one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” Gerrish comments, “That, to him, was the one thing certain. And it is not so very different for ourselves.” The evangelist who, when asked if Jesus is alive, replied, “I know he is: I spoke with him this morning,” offered, Gerrish says, “a wiser response than any attempt to prove the tomb was empty, though we might do better to reverse the order of the response.” (I spoke with him this morning because I know that he is alive, not the other way round.)

I’m not as sure as Gerrish is that everyone necessarily believes that the world is ordered and that we have moral responsibilities. Whether I read postmodern intellectuals or try to understand my students’ favorite pop music, I run into people who seem to doubt that the world makes any sense at all. Unlike some contemporary theologians, I’m not inclined to celebrate this development. Like Gerrish, I would rather argue with Deists than with deconstructionists.

Still, here we are, and it seems to me arbitrary to accept the challenges of religious pluralism and historical skepticism about Jesus while ignoring postmodern nihilism. If we find atheists who believe the world has a kind of moral order, we do indeed have a great starting point for conversation with them. Or if we find atheists fascinated by the gospel picture of Jesus, we could start there. But I don’t think we can stipulate that any of these starting points is the one every conversation partner has to accept.

In response to people who tried to figure out by careful introspection if they were saved, Calvin once remarked that “we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves” but only in “Christ . . . the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.” Even at our best, we are pretty ambiguous characters, and it is only by God’s grace in Christ that we have hope of salvation. Gerrish would certainly agree. He writes eloquently about grace. However, if saving faith rests on what we observe about God’s work in us to such an extent that we can be indifferent to historical claims about Jesus, do we not risk looking to ourselves rather than to Christ for our assurance?

I would agree that the clarity with which I find myself seeing the world when I look at it through the lens of the Gospels counts more for the Gospels’ “truth” than the available historical evidence does—though that mysterious power we can only call

the work of the Holy Spirit may count most of all. But why I believe is a different question from what I believe. The logic of Christian faith, it seems to me, involves making claims about Jesus, not just about stories about Jesus or how those stories affect our lives. If it turned out, say, that Jesus was really a political revolutionary who wanted to kill as many Romans as possible, then I'd have to give up on Christian faith. However unlikely that eventuality, keeping it in mind reminds me both of some core beliefs and of some significant risks involved in being a Christian.

Gerrish, if I understand him right, would even in that extreme case be willing to say, "But look at how the gospel story of the Jesus who taught love has transformed your life and the lives of Christians down the centuries. Isn't that what really matters?" In this he differs from Schleiermacher (whom he usually so much admires), who made a similar argument from Christian experience but also thought that historical research could establish that Jesus was the person that our experience of faith presupposes him to be.

Despite such disagreements, I wish I could regularly hear Gerrish preach. His former student Mary T. Stimming has performed the great service of collecting 28 of his sermons, arranging them topically and providing helpful notes. Anyone interested in good preaching can learn from these sermons. They are both general models of what it means to be a preacher and the source of lots of excellent material.

Gerrish clearly has a strong sense that the preacher's job is to interpret the biblical message to the congregation. He knows that a sermon is not a lecture, but he also knows that a preacher is also a teacher. Therefore, in some of these homilies he explains the meaning of the sacraments, and offers help in understanding the relation of science and faith. He tells good stories and can effectively compare diverse things—for example, the film *Lost in Space* with Pascal's work—to make his point.

At the core of these sermons lies confidence in the order of the universe and in the love of God, known through the grace of Christ: "We are driven by a kind of instinct to get beyond our fragmentary times, and to see them all as parts of one design. . . . The pieces fall into place as a single pattern, with the crucified one at the center," he says. When that happens, "We are no longer anxious, but secure: confident that, come what may, it's going to be all right." Gerrish's former University of Chicago colleague, James Gustafson, would be horrified at such an anthropocentric perspective and talk of a personal God who cares about us, but Gerrish is very clear:

“The heart of the matter is this: that God is not our adversary, not our accuser, but is on our side.” And: “I simply appeal to what every Christian knows in his or her heart: that to be a believer at all is to be vanquished by the grace of Christ.”

These sermons offer, if I may use an old-fashioned term, a powerful evangelical witness. In both these books Gerrish offers a theology that highly values church, preaching and the sacraments and has the great Reformation insights about grace at its core. It’s also a theology for which the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ developed in the early church don’t matter very much, leaving for those of us to whom they do matter the challenge of explaining why—since Gerrish can say so much so well without them—they are important. Gerrish offers not wishy-washy liberalism or secularism pretending to be Christianity, but a robust affirmation of the Reformation theology of grace. As to exactly how that fits with other things he does or does not say, we haven’t had the last word. This introductory book and these sermons anticipate Gerrish’s systematic theology, soon to be published. There are few books theologians await so eagerly.