

Faulty assumptions

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 31, 2012](#) issue



Exterior shutters of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1500.

Carlyle Marney taught me that All Saints Day is a time to remember, give thanks and wave to one's "balcony people," those individuals now gone who've had a lasting impact on one's life. This year I'm particularly grateful for Joseph Sittler. I recently spoke at a symposium on Sittler's theology which was sponsored by the Joseph Sittler Archives committee. The archives are housed at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where Sittler taught for 14 years after his retirement from the faculty of the University of Chicago Divinity School.

I met Sittler at the divinity school when I arrived as a young man with two assumptions about what it means to be a Christian and what it might mean to be a Christian minister. The first was that Christians ought to believe that there is something seriously wrong with the world. Creation from Eden onward is fallen, corrupt and sinful. The temptations of the flesh lurk everywhere. God's kingdom is "not of this world," so a Christian focusing on that kingdom must be suspicious of this world and keep a guard up against being seduced into loving this world too much.

My problem was that I loved the world. There was plenty of evidence that there is something wrong at the heart of things, enough suffering, tragedy and evil in human history to suggest that original sin isn't an inaccurate description. Yet I couldn't stop thinking that original, essential goodness is still there—and that whatever is wrong does not cancel out this goodness.

Sittler gave me the tools to rethink my original assumption. Drawing on Karl Barth and Emil Brunner's great debate on "nature and grace," Sittler proposed that the word of God and grace are accessible in creation. His definition of the word was expansive and cosmic, and he brought to his argument an amazing array of artists, musicians, architects, novelists and poets, all celebrating holiness in worldliness. He cited Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring": "What is all this juice and all this joy? / A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning / in Eden garden," as well as poems by E. E. Cummings, T. S. Eliot and others.

Martin Marty, who also spoke at the symposium, said that during Sittler's years at the divinity school, the dominant influence was process theology. Those theologians were "metaphysical," said Marty, while Sittler was "physical."

My other youthful assumption was that a Christian, and surely a Christian minister, ought to enjoy a degree of certainty about basic beliefs. I tried to. I envied and tried to emulate evangelical friends who seemed absolutely certain about truth and apparently never had a moment of doubt. But there was always a skeptical counterpoint playing in my mind: "Well, maybe not. Maybe that isn't true at all."

I went to divinity school, I now realize, to acquire some beliefs, some theological propositions that I was sure would be forever and unalterably true. But Sittler forced me to redefine Christian faith—not as a list of ideas to believe, but as a decision to follow Jesus Christ into the world and to trust him.

Sittler deplored the "subjectivization of faith," the belief that a feeling of "blessed assurance" would make it more true. He taught the expansiveness of the Christian faith, of grace and of God. He asked with characteristic eloquence, "Is the opulence of the grace of God to be measured by my inventory? Is the great catholic faith of 19 centuries to be reduced to my interior dimensions?"

"No. That ought not to be. Therefore, one is proper and right when he sometimes talks of things he doesn't know all about."

On All Saints Day, I salute Joseph Sittler, who opened important windows for me.