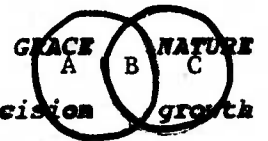


THE BIO-CHURCH: How Are Creation (NATURE) and Redemption (GRACE) Related in Christian Initiation?--a paper assigned Willis Elliott for the 13f May 66 meeting of the United Church of Christ Continuing Committee on Confirmation and Church Membership (and appearing as Appendix II in that meeting's Minutes)....#1177

Life is events and processes, and so is entrance into Life. Life (small "l") is punctuated with celebrations and transitions, and so is Life. The nexus of problems I point to with my word "the bio-church" exists in the tension between life and Life, between nature and grace; and the focus of the nexus is the question, Can we sort grace's events, processes, and celebrations out from those of nature? On page 4 of the September 8, 1963 United Church of Christ Sunday bulletin I tried to: "Confirmation is not a puberty rite sanctifying this natural coming of age. It is rather an event in grace--a strengthening...., a full welcoming...., and a personal public dedication to the life of Christian service and witness." This negative was of course an attack on those who "let nature take its course" in grade-school graduation, church-joining, etc. But I am uneasy with this rhetorical simplism. Nature never was outside of grace, and (theologically speaking) all cognition is recognition. Natural love is in gracious continuity with primal and final love. Church rites, while they consecrate soldiers of Christ for battle against sin, aim to continue and "perfect" (i.e., complete) the creative-redemptive influences from which the person is never free--as in Aquinas' inclusive and majestic statement, "Grace does not destroy tollit nature, but perfects perficit it." At the moment, the best ecclesial representation of this I can manage is the following:

Confusingly but truly representing this nexus of problems, the churches represent themselves as DECISIONAL communities ("A"), as DECISIONAL-NATURAL communities ("B"), and as NATURAL communities ("C"). These three ecclesiologies may exist in a single church, in a single theologian if sufficiently confused. The overlapping circles visualize the separability/inseparability of grace ("A") and nature ("C"). Excepting humanistic ("C") and primitivistic ("A") churches, the vast bulk of the world's churches are of the intermediate type, combining the rites of grace and the rites of passage in a confusing but rich mix: "the bio-church." I suggest that far from being embarrassing and creating uneasiness, this mixed situation should be received with thanksgiving as a divine assignment to represent in a single community the interests of nature and grace and to celebrate the mighty works of the Creator-Redeemer. Our performance, however, is usually that of my Sunday bulletin: we rob nature to pay grace; we disclaim nature in order to lodge special claims for grade; we miss opportunities for service and witness (and "relevance") because we fail to unite what God has joined together.



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Focusing this perspective, now, on the rites of the church, ^{p.2)} I propose as an organic principle in the constructing and testing of rites: HOW DOES THIS RITE CELEBRATE NATURE AND GRACE? EARTH'S STORY AND OUR STORY? Let's begin to see how this question might affect our five "Rites Celebrating Belonging" /in my paper, "Ritual Clarity"/: *

* See # 815

1. The rite of INFANT BAPTISM. This is an event-in-nature celebration, and its rite is a "C" action in violation of "A". The anabaptist-baptist tradition correctly understands this babies-and-water business as a betrayal of the pure, voluntary, confessional ideal of Christian community. Laity tend to have a better understanding of this rite, for clergy feel constrained to pull and haul on it to drag it from "C" at least to "B." (But remember: "nature" is never without "grace"!)... This rite has another standing, however, beyond its standing as a "rite celebrating belonging." It is, along with puberty /recognition of grade-school graduation/, matrimony, and memorial, "a rite of passage." The interweaving of these two sets of rites should enrich both.

2. The rite of AFFIRMATION. Bible-presentation rite at end of fourth grade; confirmation in sixth or seventh grade (Arndt); age fifteen /too late and too early./; confirmation; junior or senior high confirmation (Snyder)? "Nature" would direct that preparation for this rite ("junior confirmation"?) include understanding and celebrating the developing power of decision-making; grace, deciding what.

3...4...5....

MORAL: If clergy become less embarrassed by nature, the laity.....
.....by grace.

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24 Aug 78 NOTE: Long after the above on nature/grace, I read the beautiful parallel chapter in Donald Baillie's THE THEOLOGY OF THE SACRAMENTS [Faber & Faber/57, pp.39-54], "Sacrament, Nature and Grace." P.44: "When Christianity took the common elements of water and bread and wine and made sacraments of them, it was because this universe is the sacramental kind of place in which that can fitly happen; because these elements, these creatures of God, do lend themselves to such a use; and because we men and women, who are another sort of God's creatures, do require in our religion such a use of material things and symbolic actions."....See also my #1178, "'Spirituality,' biblical and other."