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A FRESH RIFF ON J. DENNY WEAVER'S A-THEOLOGY OR PROLEGOMENON TO A STEWARDSHIP RHETORIC

Susan L. Biesecker and Jason R. Moyer

Many people tell [him that his] style is [horrific]; it is kind of different, but let's get specific.¹

—KRS One

INTRODUCTION

J. Denny Weaver's "theology" is irritating. Its style is impolite, its substance improper. Weaver writes, albeit in postmodern fashion, as one who speaks the truth. Although he recognizes that his truth is particular to an Anabaptist perspective, he also notes that every other truth-claim is similarly particular. However, while refusing to adopt common responses to this condition—polite tolerance, on the one hand, or self-righteous fundamentalism, on the other—Weaver nevertheless confesses that his truth has universal aspirations.²

Further, Weaver does not present his truth in an objective manner. Rather, his style is that of the advocate of a truth that carries definite

implications not only for our collective politics but also for our individual salvation. Weaver's style is impolite also in the sense that it is not deferential to theological authority, whether that authority derives from tradition and takes the form of orthodoxy or grows out of privileged institutional positions and follows methodological protocol. He does not assume that well-recognized and respected theological approaches have any special claim on truth. On the contrary, he views such approaches with skepticism, assuming that their respectability has more to do with privilege than insight. Weaver also does not seek our approval; instead, he demands our assent. Rather than rationalize our present beliefs or practices, he challenges us with the truth, demands that we agree, and calls us to be transformed.

Finally, Weaver's style is relentlessly argumentative. He welcomes others' rebuttals as opportunities to sharpen his case, confident that ultimately he can win any argument. Moreover, he never tires of making his case and will make it anytime, anywhere, to anyone. In all these ways Weaver's theological style is presumptuous, irreverent, and contentious—in short, impolite.

The substance of Weaver's theology is improper when measured against the standards of traditional theology. Weaver's theology does not take up in systematic fashion the traditional categories of theology like Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, etc., to theorize them in relation to each other for a comprehensive understanding. Instead, his theology speaks to traditional theological categories as a response to perceived crises within the church. For instance, Weaver takes up the atonement not to develop some larger theological system but to respond to a problem that he sees—namely, that the church's understanding of the atonement authorizes violence. In this sense Weaver's theology is deeply historical rather than primarily philosophical.

Additionally, to resolve the problems he identifies, Weaver does not turn to classical theological systems from which he might construct an alternative. Instead, he turns to Anabaptist sources, not as "heroes to emulate or principles to adopt," but as historical examples whose "struggle for faithfulness" yields a truthful interpretive lens for understanding Jesus and his relationship to the world.³ Through this interpretive lens we can read the true story of Jesus which, if we will choose to enter it, provides a genuine Christian posture from which we may engage the world.

Not only are the sources for Weaver's theology atypical in the sense that they are historical rather than philosophical, they are also

sources once (and by some still) considered heretical: Anabaptists who did not produce their own "proper" theology; who had no unified theological, sociological, or political origin; who had no reputable spokesperson (like a Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli); who were itinerants jotting down apocalyptic musings while on the run from the authorities; and who even today resist easy categorization—neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither evangelical nor fundamentalist. Non-systematic, deeply historical, and based in "heretical" sources, we could say that more than a theology, Weaver's is an a-theology.⁴

Weaver's a-theology not only breaks with the conventions and protocols of traditional theology, it also upends the purpose and disrupts the substance of proper theology. Weaver challenges the primary purpose of traditional theology, to reveal the true nature of God, by insisting that theology is always political. For Weaver theology is never purely theoretical; it is also always a practice. That is, Weaver is always interested in what theology does by way of what it says.

In *Keeping Salvation Ethical*, for instance, Weaver shows that the politics of theology, in this case nineteenth-century Mennonite atonement theology, justified violence. Thus, he argues that "*nineteenth-century Mennonite atonement theology contained a latent threat to the peace theology and to the peace practice of succeeding Mennonite generations* (*italics in original*)."⁵ In his later study, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Weaver continues to develop a corrective to those nineteenth-century theologies that authorized violence. His answer is what he calls narrative Christus Victor atonement theology, a theology which, he argues, is inherently nonviolent and, therefore, incapable of authorizing violence:

Above all, in narrative Christus Victor salvation and justice are no longer based on the violence of justice equated with punishment. Salvation does not depend on balancing sin by retributive violence. Making right no longer means the violence of punishment. Justice and salvation are accomplished in narrative Christus Victor by doing justice and participating in God's saving work.⁶

So important are the politics of theology for Weaver that his starting point for producing theology is by definition political. Specifically, rather than begin with the nature of God as would a traditional theology, Weaver's theology begins with Jesus and, moreover, not just any Jesus. Weaver's theology finds its logical origin in the nonviolent Jesus of John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. Thus, for in-

stance, Weaver's theology of atonement takes as its foundational premise the nonviolent politics of Jesus:

The working assumption in development of this model [of narrative Christus Victor] is that the rejection of violence, whether the direct violence of the sword or the systemic violence of racism or sexism, should be visible in expressions of Christology and atonement.⁷

With a nonviolent political Jesus at its center, Weaver's "theology" disrupts the substance of proper theology by disturbing the normative status of the so-called ecumenical creeds. Traditionally the creeds are understood as a collection of uncontested truths that serve as the foundation of Christendom. For Weaver the creeds are true yet problematic because they do nothing to shape the church in the direction of Jesus' teachings on the rejection of violence. Because they are silent on the teachings of Jesus, he argues, they do not do the political work that is needed—namely, to help the church witness to the nonviolent reign of God. So troubling is this argument for proper theology that it is worth quoting at length:

Recall that Nicea's central claim is that Jesus is "one substance" or "one being" with the Father. Recall that the formula of Chalcedon proclaimed Jesus as "fully God and fully man." With awareness of the nonviolent character of the reign of God made visible in the narrative of Jesus and expressed in narrative Christus Victor, I simply ask, "What is there about the formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon that express the character of the reign of God, in particular its nonviolent character?" "What is there about these formulas that can shape the church that would follow Jesus in witnessing to the reign of God in the world?" Answer: virtually nothing. If all we know of Jesus is that he is "one substance with the Father," and that he is "fully God and fully man," there is nothing there that expresses the ethical dimension of being Christ-related, nothing there that would shape the church so that it can be a witness to the world. When these formulas serve as the summary touchstone of Christian faith, there is nothing of the particularity of Jesus to enable the Christ-related person to shape the church as an extension of Jesus' presence in the world.⁸

As texts that, according to Weaver, fail to recognize the centrality of the rejection of violence not only to Jesus but to the reign of God, the creeds should not be taken as they have been for so long as defining

statements about what it means to be a Christian, even if the content of their specific propositions is accurate.

Challenging the creeds in this way renders them inadequate for current ecumenical efforts which presume that a condition of possibility for catholicity is an affirmation of the creeds as the universal and common core for all Christian theology, belief, and practice. Mark Noll observes that one of the great rifts within the Christian faith—that is, between Catholics and evangelicals—has largely been sutured by the growing recognition among these two groups that they share in common core beliefs articulated by the creeds. Thus Noll writes:

Among evangelicals and Catholics who are open to cooperation there now exists a broad and deep foundation of agreement on the central teachings of Christianity. Such evangelicals and Catholics affirm together the Trinity, the sinfulness of humanity, the saving love of God extended to sinners in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit to change men and women into servants of God, and the wholesome integrity of God's law. . . . Differences on basic Christian convictions between Catholics and evangelicals fade away as if to nothing when compared to secular affirmations about the nature of humanity and the world.⁹

If the church's catholicity depends on core documents like the apostles' Creed or the evangelical "four spiritual laws" that omit the central truth of Jesus—the rejection of the sword—then the project of ecumenism excludes the most important feature of Christian faith. Thus, Weaver's theology disturbs the ecumenical project by suggesting that the unity it buys comes at the price of marginalizing the essential truth of Christianity—God's rejection of violence.

From the perspective of style, Weaver's theology is impolite. From the perspective of form, it is improper. From the perspective of substance, it is political. From the perspective of ecumenical efforts, it is troublemaking. Indeed, in all these ways it is irritating.

TRUTH TELLING

I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

—Paul of Tarsus (1 Cor. 2:3-5, NIV)

To better contextualize the character of Weaver's irritating, improper theology, we turn to the work of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Throughout his writings, Foucault seeks to describe the ways the particular discourses of psychiatry, punishment, sexuality, and even grammar discipline our subjectivity by enabling us to speak, but only according to the modes authorized by these discourses. In his study, *Fearless Speech*, Foucault takes up a question raised in the third volume of his *History of Sexuality*: How is it that, even as individual subjectivities are constituted and spoken by particular discourses, we might (and in fact do) nevertheless say something else, speaking in ways that are disruptive of available modes of making sense. To pursue this question, Foucault, as is his wont, turns to the ancient Greeks, seeking in them an idea or a practice foreign to us. What he finds is the practice of *parrhesia*, or truth telling, a practice that disturbs our still-modern understanding of truth by making it possible for us to imagine speaking truth to power even without secure epistemological foundations.

According to Foucault, the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* or truth telling speaks truth not by way of a correspondence between, say, word and reality but, instead, through a set of relationships among self, power, and morality that constitute the *parrhesiastes*, or truth teller. For Foucault, what this ancient Greek practice gives us is a way to tell truth that transgresses our problems with a modern understanding of truth by constituting a certain ethos or position within language and culture that enables truth telling.¹⁰ As we will see below, this demanding ethos requires that the truth teller occupy a particular position within language and culture characterized by *frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty*.

By *frankness* Foucault means a correspondence between thought and word. The truth-teller is someone "who says everything that [she] has in mind: [she] does not hide anything, but opens [her] heart and mind completely to other people through [her] discourse."¹¹ The *parrhesiastes* practices frankness because she understands herself to speak the truth. By *truth* Foucault means a correspondence between what is believed and what is true. For Foucault, the truth-teller is someone who "says what is true because [she] *knows* it is true; and [she] *knows* that it is true because it really is true."¹² However, the guarantor of the truth-teller's access to truth is not a modern epistemology but, instead, her moral quality. Moreover, the sign of the truth-teller's high moral quality is her courage: "If there is a kind of 'proof' of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes*, it is [her] *courage*."

The fact that a speaker says something dangerous—different from what the majority believes—is a strong indication that [she] is a *parrhesiastes*."

By *danger*, Foucault signals that *parrhesia* always involves taking a risk. For Foucault, a *parrhesiastes* is one who in speaking the truth takes a risk because she speaks that truth to power. That risk may or may not be life-threatening. It might involve anything from the loss of popularity, to the loss of a friendship, to the loss of life. In any case, the *parrhesiastes* is one who makes herself vulnerable by telling someone in power a truth they do not want to hear. Moreover, she does so because she would rather suffer on behalf of truth than gain security through falsehood. As Foucault puts it, the truth-teller takes this risk because "When you accept the *parrhesiastic* game in which your own life is exposed, you are taking up a specific relationship to yourself: you risk death to tell the truth instead of reposing in the security of a life where the truth goes unspoken."¹³

What makes the truth that the *parrhesiastes* tells potentially objectionable to the other in power and, therefore, risky is its critical character. When the *parrhesiastes* confesses a truth critical of herself, she risks punishment from the other in power. When the *parrhesiastes* tells a truth critical of the other in power, she risks the wrath of the other. Such risk is an integral part of truth telling for Foucault since the truth-teller is always in a subordinate relationship to the other: "[p]arrhesia is a form of criticism, either toward another or toward oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom [she] speaks. The *parrhesia* comes from 'below,' as it were, and is directed toward 'above.'"¹⁴

The *parrhesiastes* takes the risk of speaking a critical truth to power because she knows it to be her duty to correct an error that she or the other has made. However, in order for her to exercise her duty, she must choose it. For Foucault, *parrhesia* can never be coerced by another even as it is undertaken out of an intense feeling of obligation: "To criticize a friend or a sovereign is an act of *parrhesia* insofar as it is a duty to help a friend who does not recognize his wrongdoing, or insofar as it is a duty toward the city to help the king to better himself as a sovereign. *Parrhesia* is thus related to freedom and to duty."¹⁵ *Parrhesia*, in summary, is:

a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life

through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as [herself]).¹⁶

Initially we might be surprised to find Foucault, a postmodern philosopher of great renown, advancing a characterization of truth telling. As conventionally understood, postmodern philosophy poses a profound challenge to truth or at least to modern conceptions of a stable, coherent, and universal truth. Yet this text describes an ethos conducive to truth telling. However, truth telling for Foucault does not involve establishing an epistemological link between language and reality, but rather cultivating a mode of being within discourse that makes possible a move beyond conventional wisdom toward the articulation of something else, something new, something true. The conditions of possibility for that ethos are frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty.

WEAVER'S A-THEOLOGY AS TRUTH TELLING

*If Anabaptists, Catholics, and Protestants shared as much in common as [Arnold] Snyder's approach, it would then follow that neither side understood the issue at stake (pun intended!).*¹⁷

—J. Denny Weaver

With Foucault's retrieval of the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* in mind, we may read Weaver's a-theology as *parrhesia* and Weaver as a *parrhesiastes*. Indeed, the features of *parrhesia* make for an apt characterization of the style and substance of Weaver's a-theology.

Earlier when we were arguing that Weaver's style is impolite, we defended that claim by pointing out that it is relentlessly argumentative. Also in that connection we noted that he actively seeks out opportunities to argue his a-theological positions. Now we may say that Weaver's style or, better put, his a-theological ethos, exhibits frankness. Like the *parrhesiastes*, Weaver displays a correspondence between his thought and speech. It is as if he is incapable of holding back his arguments. Weaver exhibits the quality of frankness because he knows that he speaks the truth. There is nothing in Weaver's style

to indicate that he hesitates about the truth he espouses. The only question for him is how to present that truth in the most logically compelling way possible.

When we earlier argued that the substance of Weaver's a-theology is improper, we said that it did not meet traditional standards of theology because it is neither systematic nor ahistorical, neither apolitical nor creedal. Instead, we said that Weaver's a-theology is always shaped by contemporary exigencies within the church. Weaver does not focus on developing a coherent theological system that will stand the test of time but, instead, on faithfully continuing that historical struggle to make the church into the visible instantiation of God's reign within the contingencies of the present. Given Weaver's Anabaptist understanding that the church makes the reign of God visible when it presents itself as an alternative community faithful to the nonviolent politics of Jesus, Weaver's a-theology is thoroughly political. Finally, we noted that Weaver's a-theology disrupts the status of the creeds by simultaneously drawing our attention to the fact that the creeds say nothing on behalf of nonviolence and insisting that nonviolence be at the center of all things theological. For all these reasons, then, we called Weaver's an a-theology—that is to say, an improper theology.

As such, Weaver's a-theology is dangerous. It is dangerous for Weaver as a theologian because it breaks the rules of the theological guild. In advancing his a-theology, then, Weaver risks marginalization or worse among proper theologians. Further, Weaver's a-theology is dangerous in the sense that it speaks truth to power. He tells theologians something that they do not want to hear—namely, that all theology is political and, further, that theirs does not have the right politics. In addition, as someone who bases his improper theology on the thinking of heretics and, in addition, locates himself in a contemporary religious tradition often taken to be sectarian, Weaver finds himself in an inferior position with respect to other theologians. As someone who challenges the theological guild from what that guild derides as a 'sectarian' position, it can be said that Weaver adopts an inferior position through his a-theology and, thus, may rightly be called critical in the sense Foucault means in his discussion of parrhesiastes.

At the crux of Weaver's a-theology is the necessary choice that all Christians must make at the foot of the cross and in the light of the resurrection between living according to the reign of God or accepting the rule of the *not-yet-reign-of-God*. For Weaver the atonement is not a

matter of the sacrifice of divine flesh for human sin which, according to Anselmian substitutionary atonement, grants us God's grace. In Weaver's a-theology the Christ event represents the inbreaking of the reign of God which creates an *aporia* or impasse that all Christians must resolve by way of their own choice. Salvation obliges a choice about faith in Jesus' victory over the powers. While necessary for salvation, however, this choice is insufficient. Having made this choice the Christian must then live accordingly. She must witness to the truth in which she has faith—that the reign of God is victorious—by living according to its logic rather than according to the logics of sin and death. Thus, all that she thinks, says, and does should correspond to that reign-of-God logic.

If Weaver takes his own a-theology seriously, which he surely does, then he is obliged to tell others the truth that he knows, to tell them that their salvation depends not only on recognizing the ultimate supremacy of the reign of God but also, having done so, to witness to that choice in all that they do. He is obliged to tell this truth since he has himself made this choice. Thus, everything he thinks, says, or does, including his a-theology, must serve as his witness. Truth telling is a matter of his own salvation. It is also a matter of his duty to the other. Knowing as he does that the fate of the other's soul is at stake, Weaver is obliged to tell the other what she does not want to hear—namely, that discipleship and the conduct of life is a matter of salvation. Or, put another way, faith, although necessary, is insufficient.

Recalling what Foucault says about the relationship between freedom and obligation, we may say both that Weaver's a-theology of atonement is parrhesiastic and that Weaver is a parrhesiastes. It is parrhesiastic, first, because it depends upon the Christian's freedom to choose whether to tell the other the truth. The Christian has the option to witness to the reign of God or not. It is parrhesiastic, second, because this truth telling involves confronting the other with something she does not want to hear. Finally, Weaver is a parrhesiastes since he freely chooses to tell this discomforting truth to the other for her benefit. It is on behalf of her salvation that he freely engages in this a-theological witness to the reign of God.

We opened this paper with the claim that J. Denny Weaver's a-theology is irritating because its style is impolite and its substance improper. We supported our claim by showing how Weaver's style and substance may easily be read in that way. With a turn to Foucault's reading of parrhesia, however, we have attempted to write a "fresh riff," or a new take on that easy read. Thus, we have argued that

Weaver's a-theology should not be read as simply irritating but, instead, should be understood as parrhesiastic because it frankly criticizes power out of a sense of duty even in the face of danger. Having said this much we also want to say that neither Weaver's parrhesiastic a-theology nor his ethos as a parrhesiastes are unique to him. On the contrary, the characteristics we have identified in Weaver's a-theology may also be read amid many sixteenth-century Anabaptist texts.

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANABAPTISM AS TRUTH TELLING

*Two Dominican friars also came to her, the one as a confessor, and the other as an instructor. The latter showed her the crucifix, saying: "See, here is your Lord and your God." She answered: 'This is not my God; the cross by which I have been redeemed, is a different one. This is a wooden god; throw him into the fire, and warm yourselves with him.'*¹⁸

—Martyrs Mirror

Ques. "What do you hold concerning the holy oil?"

*Ans. "Oil is good for salad, or to oil your shoes with."*¹⁹

—Martyrs Mirror

The origins of Anabaptist truth telling may be found among the stories recounted in *Martyrs Mirror*. In those stories we hear of Anabaptists who willingly and frequently defied church-state authorities by instructing those authorities in what they knew to be the truth of the Christian faith. For this truth telling, thousands were executed by the authorities and many more were severely tortured or exiled. One such story goes like this:

About the year 1553 . . . a shopkeeper, named Simon, . . . stood in the marketplace, to sell his wares. When the priests passed him with their idol, this Simon did not dare give divine honor to this idol made by human hands, but, according to the testimony of God presented in the holy Scriptures, would worship and serve only the Lord his God. He was therefore apprehended by the maintainers of the Roman antichrist, and examined in the faith, which he freely confessed, rejecting their self-invented infant baptism together with all human commandments, and holding fast only to the testimony of the Word of God; hence he was sentenced to death by the enemies of the truth, and was thus led without the city, and burnt for the testimony of Jesus.²⁰

In his defiant stance on the street that day, Simon frankly spoke the truth about idols by refusing to perform an act of subservience to them. He further instructed the authorities in that truth, thereby criticizing them, by not bowing down to them. His was an especially visible critique that, according to the account and the engraving that accompanies it, was known to him, to the authorities, and to all assembled on the street that day and could not go unanswered. Answered it was, of course, by his prompt execution.

Speaking of the hundreds of Anabaptist martyr stories he had compiled for *The Martyrs Mirror*, Thieleman van Braght writes the following about the freedom and even boldness with which these truth tellers went forth to their executions for their frankness and truth:

Yet to look upon all this [death and torture] will not cause real sadness, for though the aspect is dismal according to the body, the soul will nevertheless rejoice in it, seeing that not one of all those who were slain preferred life to death, since life often was proffered them on condition that they depart from the constancy of their faith. But this they did not desire; on the contrary, many of them went boldly onward to meet death; some even hastened to outstrip others, that they might be the first, who did not shrink from suffering anything the tyrants could devise, nay more than could be thought possible for a mortal man to endure.²¹

Simon's story was not unique, Braght tells us. Despite differences in the details among the stories recounted in *Martyrs Mirror*, Simon's story is paradigmatic of the rest, at least in terms of truth telling. As we said above, then, Weaver's particular parrhesia and his ethos as a parrhesiastes can be understood as a reiteration of the thousands of sixteenth-century Anabaptist parrhesiastes who preceded him.

Reading Weaver through Foucault allows us to recognize that it is not the case that Weaver has a theology that just happens to be argued in an irritating way. Weaver's theology is irritating precisely because it is a truth telling. And truth telling is always irritating because it is always antagonistic, which in this case is to say that it is contrary to the interests of the powers. Finally, this reading via Foucault has enabled us to say that it is antagonistic in this way for reasons of faith.

THE GIFT OF TRUTH

What God-word brings, may we embrace; success and suff'ring greet us; confronting evil face to face, as scorn and anger meet us. For freedom's

sake we bend we break, a sign to ev'ry nation that we have found a solid ground; God's Word our sure foundation.²²

—Ausbund Hymn

In *Fearless Speech* Foucault draws attention to the fact that for ancient Greeks, unlike moderns, the acquisition of truth was not a problem. For moderns who, since Descartes, are modern insofar as they are suspicious of truth, the method by which truth is obtained is the central problem. In modern epistemology truth is secured through the proper and orderly application of reason, logic, and evidence. By contrast, for ancient Greeks who were not suspicious of truth, their concern was not with method but with the moral character of the one speaking truth. As Foucault puts it:

[s]ince Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a *verbal activity*, namely, *parrhesia*.²³

As we noted in our earlier discussion of truth as a dimension of *parrhesia*, the activity of truth telling depends on the moral character of the truth teller rather than on proper method. To quote Foucault again: "In the Greek conception of *parrhesia* . . . there does not seem to be a problem about the acquisition of the truth since such truth-having is guaranteed by the possession of certain *moral* qualities: when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth—and vice versa."²⁴ Thus, the condition of possibility for *parrhesia* is an ethos understood not in the generic sense of credibility but in the more particular sense of moral character.²⁵

Earlier we noted that in recovering the activity of *parrhesia* (as it includes frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty), Foucault makes it possible for us to imagine a subject position from within which contemporary modes of making sense may be disrupted. In addition we indicated that imagining such a subject position is enabled by the fact that *parrhesia* circumvents the modern problematic of truth.

Now we see how this is so. By recuperating a decidedly premodern practice of truth, Foucault shifts the question from one of truth to truth telling, from one of knowledge to ethos, from one of method to ethics. In so doing he makes it possible for us postmoderns, who are no more capable of confidence in the modern regime of truth than we

are able simply to give up its methods for securing truth, to imagine a way to speak truth to power.

For sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the acquisition of truth was also not the problem. Like the ancient Greeks, the Anabaptists did not doubt the truth that they knew. Further, as we argued above, they told that truth as parrhesiastes—that is as truth tellers who frankly criticized the powers in the face of danger and out of a sense of duty. Although they shared the practice of parrhesia with the ancient Greeks and in this sense occupied a similar ethos, their ethos was shaped by its relationship to a peculiar truth that was not derived but awaited, not fixed but messianic, not discovered but given.

Unlike modern truth, derived from the rigors of logical deduction, empirical verification, and objective scrutiny, Anabaptist truth is collectively awaited. Following the Rule of Paul, sixteenth-century Anabaptists sought truth in the congregation gathered around Scripture and awaiting the Holy Spirit. According to John Howard Yoder, "[i]t is a basic novelty in the discussion of hermeneutics to say that a text is best understood in a congregation. This means that the tools of literary analysis do not suffice; that the Spirit is an interpreter of what a text is about only when Christians are gathered in readiness to hear it speak to their current needs and concerns."²⁶ Further, Yoder argues, this mode of truth-seeking implies that every member of the congregation has the potential to speak truth.²⁷ In other words, every member of the congregation has the potential to speak as a parrhesiastes. Furthermore, the congregation is not bound either by creedal statements or tradition as it seeks the truth. In such a context for seeking truth, there is no historical *a priori* ground by which truth may be secured.²⁸ The Holy Spirit is in charge of those gathered and leads the congregation toward what may likely be an altogether new understanding of the text and thus of truth.

An additional implication of this mode of seeking truth is that truth is not fixed or static but arrives by way of the Holy Spirit and is on the move. It does not keep repeating itself but often makes unexpected claims. This seems to be the point that sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck makes when he writes about the nature of the truth of the cross: "The living cross and hand of Christ shows the way, does not stand immovable in one place, never has and never will, for it is itself the way from which the truth comes and is the truth from which life comes. This life comes from faith and faith gives birth to all virtue and the knowledge of Christ."²⁹ Like the cross, all Christian truth within this view is understood as messianic, as ongoing

revelation that, in not being ahistorical, is subject to change. As such, this sort of truth may at any time throw interpretive tradition, conventional wisdom and, inevitably, social relations into crisis.

Further, this truth comes not by way of ruthless examination, but as a patiently awaited gift from God.³⁰ Sixteenth-century Anabaptists focused their attention not on the question of right belief or orthodoxy, but rather on right relationship or obedience to messianic truth. To quote Marpeck again: "The spiritual in Christ are committed to obedience to the Father in patience and love through the Word even as Christ, the Righteous one, became obedient unto death."³¹ Again, the problem is not truth, its status, or its acquisition, but instead one's relationship to God's gift of messianic truth. For the Anabaptist *parrhesiastes* the practice of truth telling involves not only a certain relationship to the powers to which one speaks truth out of duty, but also a certain relationship to an unruly truth received as a gift from the One who gives all.

So far we have argued that we should read Weaver's a-theology as *parrhesia*. Further, we have argued that doing so is important because it enables us to see that his arguments are not merely irritating. Rather, the manner in which they are made, their rhetoric, similar as it is to the practice of *parrhesia* among ancient Greeks, is a form of not-modern truth telling. Weaver's practice of truth telling is important for us in these postmodern days because, as we argued earlier, it shows a way to get around the modern problem of truth through ethics. The truth teller tells the truth not by way of a certain methodologism but via a certain moral ethos. Thus, noticing how Weaver and other Anabaptists tell the truth in this way can put us on the track of how we might also speak truth to power in our postmodern context.

Along the way we noted two distinctives of Anabaptist truth telling: first, that the truth Anabaptists tell is always received as an unruly truth in the sense that it is a truth on the move; and second, that it comes as a gift from God.³² Thus, Anabaptist truth telling is not the same as the truth telling that Foucault describes. Because we are interested in enabling truth telling in our postmodern times in a distinctly Anabaptist manner, we want to advocate an Anabaptist ethos of truth telling that presumes that the truth told is received as an unruly gift of God. In preparation for that argument we want first to say something about our relationship to God's gifts and about rhetoric.

STEWARDSHIP

*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*³³

—Peter of Jerusalem (1 Pet. 4:10-11)

Thinking about God's gifts and our relationship to them is an ancient preoccupation at least as old as the Judeo-Christian story of the origins of creation. In the first account of creation, for instance, we read the following: "God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food'" (Gen. 1:29-30). Thus God creates all and gives all to human beings. But even as the whole creation is a gift of God, God retains ownership of all. The Psalmist writes: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). In the context of God's creation, gift, and ownership of all, human beings are positioned as stewards of the creation.³⁴

We learn something of what it means to be a steward in Genesis when man is placed within the context of that gift: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to fill it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). The responsibility of human beings as stewards is not to create things, but instead, like gardeners, to cultivate God's gifts from within a posture of submission. Genesis' message is

that the responsibility of every man is like the gardener's, to know that though he creates nothing he is responsible to cultivate what God has given; that growth cannot be forced by any human haste and that the silent process of the divine unfolding must be trusted; and that those who have grown most in grace, like men who must have their gardens grow in sun and rain and changing seasons, will be most humble in themselves and most reverent before the unfolding mysteries of God.³⁵

The steward of God's gift who submits and cultivates displays an ethos called for by her relationship to the one who creates, gives, and

owns the creation. Since Anabaptists understand truth to be a gift of God, we suggest a particular practice of truth telling that presumes a posture of stewardship in relationship to truth.

RHETORIC

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

—Paul of Tarsus (I Cor. 1: 22-25)

As Foucault acknowledges throughout *Fearless Speech*, truth telling is rhetorical. "*Parrhesia*," according to Foucault, "is thus a sort of 'figure' among rhetorical figures, but with this characteristic: that it is without any figure since it is completely natural. *Parrhesia* is the zero degree of those rhetorical figures which intensify the emotions of the audience."³⁶ As a mode of speaking that disavows its rhetoricity, *parrhesia* is especially rhetorical.³⁷ But to say that *parrhesia* is rhetorical is only a start because, as Foucault points out, there are multiple rhetorics or multiple ways of thinking about the relationship between truth telling and rhetoric.

Considering the two predominant views on rhetoric and truth from the ancient Greek context, for instance, we see that truth telling, following Plato, may be understood as the opposite of rhetoric—that is as speech that is transparent to truth rather than veiled in eloquence. Or truth telling, following Aristotle, may be understood as made possible by rhetoric when two opposing viewpoints are set against one another in debate so that the audience, given its propensity to appreciate when a position has been demonstrated, can recognize the position that is true. But rather than adopt either of these philosophical perspectives on rhetoric that understands truth to be, by definition, static, we take up a sophistic view of rhetoric since, as we shall see, its view of rhetoric in relationship to an unruly truth is well suited to Anabaptist *parrhesia*.

For the Sophists, who were itinerant teachers of rhetoric throughout the Greek city-states in the fifth-century BCE, truth understood in absolute terms is at best elusive. According to Protagoras, a leading Sophist, knowledge about ultimate things like the gods is unavailable to human beings: "Concerning the gods," Protagoras argues, "I can-

not know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life."³⁸ Similarly, Gorgias, another prominent Sophist of the time, is said to have argued that nothing exists but that even if anything exists it is incomprehensible and, further, that even if anything is comprehensible, it is incommunicable.³⁹ What human beings do have access to are the human truths (or *doxa*) that emerge relative to their own experience and which, therefore, vary from place to place and time to time. Thus, Protagoras writes that "Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not."⁴⁰

For the Sophists, then, truth is elusive on two registers: first, at the level of an absolute, Truth is elusive since, even if it exists, human beings have no access to it; and second, at the level of human experience, truth is elusive since it changes over time and space. Insofar as Sophistic truth is not static like philosophical truth but, instead, inaccessible and ever changing, we may say that it is also unruly.⁴¹

Not only did the Sophists understand truth to be unruly. More importantly for our purposes they thought that it was the job of rhetoric to encourage its unruliness. In a fragment attributed to Protagoras, for instance, he articulates the sophistic principle that rhetoric's aim is to "mak[e] the weaker argument the stronger."⁴² Since Protagoras does not believe that human beings have access to truth, we should not take him to mean by "the stronger argument" the one that is truer when measured against some external truth standard. Instead, we must take him to mean the argument that most closely reiterates accepted human truth. To say that the aim of rhetoric is to make the weaker argument the stronger, then, is to say that rhetoric's task is not only to challenge but to transform the dominant truths of a culture by articulating an alternative one.⁴³

To transform truth requires, according to the Sophists, attentiveness to time and occasion. Since truth is bound by time and context, any effort to transform it must be likewise constrained. Thus, John Poulakos, scholar of sophistic rhetoric, argues that "The Sophists stressed that speech must show respect to the temporal dimension of the situation it addresses, that is, it must be timely. In other words, speech must take into account and be guided by the temporality of the situation in which it occurs."⁴⁴ As kairotic discourse, rhetoric is obliged to speak into the particularities of the moment and, especially, the urgencies at hand. Indeed, as Poulakos argues, "what compels a rhetor to speak is a sense of urgency" and further, "to intervene

and, with the power of the word, to attempt to end a crisis, redistribute justice, or restore order."⁴⁵

Crucial here, however, is that any attempt to transform truth can only be successful if it is spoken in the moment that calls it into being: "ideas have their place in time and unless they are given existence, unless they are voiced at the precise moment they are called upon, they miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids within a particular audience."⁴⁶

By implication, then, when the particularities of the moment do not call forth a rhetorical response, silence should be the order of the day.⁴⁷ An important implication of the kairotic dimension of rhetoric is that anyone who dares to speak into the moment does so at some risk since "his timing might not coincide with the temporal needs of the situation."⁴⁸ The rhetorician may mistake the moment and, in so doing, speak a discourse at the wrong time and, therefore, fail to move the audience to an alternative truth.

In a similar manner, the Sophists recognized that rhetoricians must be attentive to the formal demands of the occasion in which they speak. Audiences have expectations about the kind of rhetoric that suits, say, a funeral versus a wedding versus a typical Sunday morning worship service. According to the Sophists, for any rhetoric to be successful in transforming accepted truth, it has to respond appropriately to the character of the occasion and the expectations of the audience.⁴⁹ As with *kairos*, *prepon* (or appropriateness to occasion) also involves risk: "If what is spoken is the result of a misreading on the part of the rhetor, it subsequently becomes obvious to us, even to him, that 'this was not the right thing to say.'"⁵⁰ Likewise, "If silence is called for and the response is speech, we have a rhetor misspeaking to an audience not ready to listen, or not ready to listen to what he has to say, or ready to listen but not to the things he is saying."⁵¹ Taken together, then, *kairos* and *prepon* characterize rhetoric as discourse that says the right thing at the right time to transform accepted truth into alternative truth.

With all of this emphasis on the moment and the occasion, we might think that sophistic rhetoric is all about the present and what already exists. But this is not so. As we have already said, a key characteristic of sophistic rhetoric is its aim to make the weaker argument the stronger, to displace dominant truths with alternative ones, to transform the actual into the possible. Beginning in the here and now and attentive to *kairos* and *prepon*, the rhetorician nevertheless "tries to lift [the audience] from the vicissitudes of custom and habit and

take them into a new place where new discoveries and new consequences can be made."⁵²

In this way, sophistic rhetoric, whose only foundation can be found in the exigencies of the moment and the expectations of the audience, seeks to transport its audience to the realm of the possible wherein the limits of current time and space are transgressed by aspiration and hope.

In this sophistic theory of rhetoric we hear deep resonances with Anabaptism. Like Anabaptism, sophistic rhetoric understands truth to be unruly and disruptive of the status quo. Moreover, like Anabaptism sophistic rhetoric takes as its aim the encouragement of such disruption through public discourse. Given these resonances, we bring a sophistic (rather than philosophical) view of rhetoric to this prolegomenon for a stewardship rhetoric. Thus, in what follows we apply the sophistic ideas of *kairos* and *prepon* to the question of what should characterize Anabaptist parrhesia.

A RHETORIC OF STEWARDSHIP

*He became angry, and said that what I advanced was only sophistry. . . . Thereupon I said that Paul writes that we should not be shaken in mind, neither by spirit nor by word, nor by letter, as sent from them; or even though an angel from heaven should come, and teach us anything different from what is written in the holy Gospel, he should be accursed.*⁵³

—Martyrs Mirror

If one sought to identify the ethos of Anabaptism with a single concept, that concept would surely be *Gelassenheit*. From sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs to present-day Old Order Amish, *Gelassenheit* characterizes a genuine Anabaptist posture in relationship to God.⁵⁴ Robert Friedmann argued that *Gelassenheit* became central to Anabaptist identity because it defined so well Anabaptist faith in the context of persecution: "their own teaching of obedience and discipleship almost required this attitude as the precondition of a reborn soul to walk the narrow path. The idea of martyrdom becomes bearable only on such a basis of self-surrender and joyous acceptance of God's will. Only through *Gelassenheit* may suffering become the royal road to God."⁵⁵ Almost 1,500 years later, in a context largely devoid of persecution, Old Order Amish identity features *Gelassenheit* as well. Donald Kraybill argues that *Gelassenheit* provides the key to unlocking all the riddles of Amish culture:

The solution to the riddle of Amish culture is embedded in the German word *Gelassenheit*. Roughly translated, *Gelassenheit* means 'submitting, yielding to a higher authority.' Rarely used in speech, it is an abstract concept that carries a variety of specific meanings—self-surrender, resignation to God's will, yielding to God and to others, self-denial, contentment, a calm spirit."⁵⁶

Yielding as Submission

At the heart of the various translations given for *Gelassenheit* is the notion of yielding to God, to other, to community. Yielding is often paired with submission to get more fully at the meaning of *Gelassenheit*. Yieldedness as submission is a deeply biblical idea and one that is closely tied to how we are to receive God's gifts—or, put another way, how we are to be stewards of God's gifts. Indeed, throughout the Old and New Testaments we learn that people who receive God's gifts are called to submission. This is so whether the gift received is the whole creation (Adam and Eve), great expanses of land and many descendants (Abraham), the deliverance of his people (Moses), the infant Messiah (Mary), or revelation (Paul).

In each case God calls the receiver of the gift to submit her life to God's will in ways that are profoundly disruptive to her, her community, and even the social order. In the case of Mary, for instance, at the Annunciation she willingly submits all of her life to God upon hearing that she has found favor with God and will give birth to the Messiah: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). In her response to God's gift, Mary gives herself entirely to God's purpose setting no limits or qualifications on her submission to God's word. Of course, since she was a virgin and engaged to Joseph, her submission to God's plan compromised her social position and, indeed, her whole life.

In the same way, Paul responds to the gift of God's truth by submitting his whole life so that he loses all his possessions and the value system within which he treasured them. More importantly, he submits to a whole new understanding of salvation according to which he is required to abandon his once ardently held conviction that righteousness comes from obedience to the law and, instead, to develop faith in the claim that salvation comes through following Jesus all the way to the cross. Thus, Paul writes in Ephesians, "[f]or his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order

that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith" (3:8-9).

Paul's submission is important for stewardship rhetoric since in his example we see how we are to respond to God's gift of truth and, in particular, to the truth of the cross. For Anabaptists, as we have noted more than once, the truth of the cross is the most important truth. But that truth is not simply the conventional one—that by Jesus' blood we are saved. Rather, as John Howard Yoder has taught us, the cross (and with it always the resurrection) represents the breaking of the sovereignty of the Powers who enslave us to their truths and by their claim to be all powerful.⁵⁷

At the cross we are invited to see that the power claimed by the Powers is a ruse and, thus, that the Powers are false gods. Once we see that this is so and willingly submit (as Jesus did) to the truth that God is sovereign even over the Powers, that the whole creation has already been reconciled to God (in actuality, even if not apparently), then we are not only freed from the enslavement of the Powers but free to join in the reconciling work of the new creation that is the church.⁵⁸ With this truth as our gift, then, the submission to which we are called is obedience to a radically unruly truth that always promises to relativize all that we know, believe, and value.

As receivers of a gift such as this, a gift of truth that is radical and unruly, what should be our posture as its stewards? If we take Paul as our example, then we may say first of all that we are called to submit all that we have and are to it. Like Paul we must be willing to give over to this truth not only all of our possessions and the values by which we treasure them but also, and more importantly, our deepest convictions. If we are to take as our task the dissemination of this truth as its rhetoricians, then we must be willing to subject all that we know to its relativizing power. The ethos of a stewardship rhetorician must be as one who is always available to God's new truth, truth we cannot yet imagine but that is on the way. Indeed, we must be relentlessly attentive to God's inbreaking revelation in our contemporary context no matter how disruptive it may be of what has become obviously true for us. If this is so, then our stewardship rhetoric must likewise be available to the radically transformative force of God's next revelation. It cannot become too fixed or static. It must remain contingent on what new word God is trying to give us.

But even as we submit to God's ongoing and unruly revelation we are also called to submit to the truth we already know, the truth of

the cross—namely, that victory over death and the Powers has already been won, the reign of God is among us, and, therefore, our task is not to force history to come out right.⁵⁹ Rather, our task is to follow Jesus by freely giving away the good news of that victory all the way to the cross. If we submit to this truth as we submit to God's ongoing revelation, then even as we energetically disseminate God's truth, we cannot as stewardship rhetoricians force it on the other. In the end, we are called as stewards of the truth that is Jesus Christ to yield to the other's unbelief, even to the other's rebellion against God's truth.

Yielding as Cultivation

The constellation of terms used to capture the meaning of *Gelassenheit* includes yielding as well as resignation, self-surrender, obedience, contentment, and calm spirit. Taken together these terms may suggest a posture that is passive not only in relationship to God but to the whole world as well. Interestingly, however, the notion of yielding entails not only submission but also cultivation in the sense that a field yields a crop or a well placed financial investment yields a profit. Cultivation denotes careful tending toward the production of a yield. Yielding as cultivation is most surely not passive as it often involves both planning and ongoing care.

Perhaps the biblical text that most strongly speaks of a yield cultivated out of God's truth is the great commission, wherein Jesus' followers are commanded by him to cultivate disciples into the body of Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). Thus we are called not only to receive God's truth and to submit our whole lives to it but, having done so, to help it grow by making, baptizing, and teaching disciples with this truth. Rather than enter into the complexities of missiological debate here about how best to answer that commandment, we do well to remember Yoder's argument that before perfecting our missiology, we are first called to announce and to celebrate the reign of God.⁶⁰

To cultivate God's gift of truth, a stewardship rhetoric must first take into account the fact that, though victorious, that truth is not widely recognized. Indeed, the Powers do not believe in the truth of the cross and largely live and work in rebellion against it. In addressing those who do not yet acknowledge the reign of God, stewardship rhetoric must be mindful that its task is, as it was for the Sophists, to

make the weaker argument the stronger. This posture of speaking from the underside of conventional wisdom should be familiar from Jesus' teachings and, of course, his work on the cross. As stewardship rhetoricians, then, our aim is to disrupt the stronger argument with the weaker argument of the truth of the cross.

To succeed in making the weaker argument of the cross appear stronger, the stewardship rhetorician must begin as the Sophists did in a certain moment and place with a particular audience in mind. We must begin amid all of the pre-existing beliefs and values of our audience as well as the various constraints and realities of the present moment. But although our stewardship rhetoric must begin there, it cannot remain there, since to do so would be merely to reproduce the status quo. Instead, in recognition of the timely (*kairos*) and the fitting (*prepon*), but with attention focused on the gap between those who acknowledge the reign of God and those who yet do not, the stewardship rhetorician is called to craft appeals capable of articulating the audience into the reign of God.

To craft a stewardship rhetoric able to move an audience from obedience to the stronger argument, which will always be the argument of the Powers, to obedience to the weaker argument, which is the reign of God, takes the utmost in rhetorical sensitivity and skill. The stewardship rhetorician will, like the Sophist, need to be someone who is keenly perceptive of the present that she and her audience occupy and who can fashion out of a common language new arguments and appeals on behalf of radical transformation.

These days we hear important calls for a certain kind of exchange with the other in which we may make our arguments to the best of our ability so long as we also make ourselves available to the transforming power of the other's argument.⁶¹ This is mutually transformative dialogue, we are told, and it is ethical insofar as both interlocutors are ultimately willing to submit to the otherness of the other's argument. To take up this posture is tempting because it seems to solve the ethical problem of advocacy. I can freely advocate my position without having to worry that I am somehow oppressing the other so long as I make myself available to the arguments of the other. But is it possible or even desirable for me to assume that posture of availability to the other's argument?

First, as to its possibility, how would I go about choosing to make myself available in that way? By what psychological mechanism could I excise or bracket from my mind my deeply held convictions such that I could hear the arguments of the other? Indeed, is my avail-

ability to the other a question of choice? Is it possible for me to decide that I will make myself available to radical transformation or, instead, is radical transformation something that happens despite my own volition? Second, as to its desirability, if my deeply held convictions are faithful to the truth that is the cross, do I even want to make them available to such radical transformation? We believe that it is neither probable that faithful Christians can nor desirable that they should bracket the truth of the cross.

Rather than try to make ourselves available to the arguments of the other to solve the ethical problem of persuasion, the stewardship rhetorician is obliged by the call to cultivation of God's gift of truth to make her arguments as persuasively as she can in the context of the moment and the situation. As she does so, she necessarily takes the risks that she may have misunderstood the moment or the occasion and, thus, misspeaks. She must risk the possibility that she may speak when she should not, or that she may say the wrong thing. In addition to taking these risks, we propose that she take another—that is, that she risk the possibility that she will speak wrongly to the other, perhaps even to the point of oppressing the other. The stewardship rhetorician must recognize that this is a possibility—that her speech may coerce and that she may engage in moral error. Further, if she does, then she must own that ethical failure.

To reduce the chances that she will make such an error, the stewardship rhetorician must consider carefully to whom, when, and where she speaks. Having a true word to say is not sufficient for speaking it. The stewardship rhetorician will have to weigh whether a certain audience is in a moment and place in which it can hear that word. If not, then the stewardship rhetorician should choose to remain silent and make the case another day. Importantly, then, the choice of the stewardship rhetorician is not about adapting the truth to her audience to make it easier to take. Neither, however, is her choice about making certain that in speaking the truth, she guarantees that the audience knows she is willing to subject that truth to radical revision by the audience. Instead, it is about discerning the moment and knowing when to speak and when to remain silent.

Of course, the stewardship rhetorician must receive and take seriously the arguments of the other. Again, however, the point in receiving them is not to make the truth of the cross available to radical transformation by the other's argument. Instead the point is to listen to the argument of the other through the truth of the cross. If upon listening carefully to it, the stewardship rhetorician decides that the ar-

gument of the other is in rebellion against the truth of the cross, then she is called to dissuade the other from it. In addition, the stewardship rhetorician should listen for the ways in which the truth of the cross may be troubling the other's argument. By listening for the gaps or fissures within an argument and between one and another argument, the stewardship rhetorician seeks to yield a new truth of the cross.

With these last two points made about the cultivation of God's gift of truth on the part of the stewardship rhetorician, we need to recall three crucial points previously made. This is so since these two points about cultivation may seem to say that the stewardship rhetorician is the lone advocate for a truth about which she is certain. This is not the case. First, if we remember that the stewardship rhetorician only gains access to truth in the context of the body of Christ gathered around Scripture in the presence of the Holy Spirit, then we know that she is not alone. On the contrary, she is accountable to that community for the truth she tells. Second, if we remember that she (in the context of that community) always avails the truth she knows to radical revision by God, then we know that she holds the truth of the cross humbly in relationship to the one who gives it. Third, if we remember that she speaks truth always as the weaker argument to the stronger, which is to say from below in a relationship of power in society and history, then her unwillingness to make the truth of the cross available to the radical transformation of the other can be seen as not an instance of domination by persuasion but, instead, as a practice of witness.

CONCLUSION

*Christ's servants follow him to death and give their body, life, and breath on cross and rack and pyre. As gold is tried and purified they stand the test of fire.*⁶²

—Ausbund Hymn

Robert Friedman lamented that as Mennonites have become acculturated to a society that puts a premium on individualism and achievement they have largely abandoned *Gelassenheit*.⁶³ Seeing *Gelassenheit* as too passive for engagement with the world, Mennonites who have left behind what are often understood as the backward and sectarian ways of the Old Orders reject yielding. But if we take into account the two senses of yielding we have been developing

here—that is, both submission to God and others and cultivation of the reign of God through persuasive speech—then even we Mennonites who want most to engage the world may imagine a posture or ethos that embodies our sixteenth-century ancestors' identity in *Gelassenheit*, but in a way that is neither passive nor sectarian.

That posture, of course, is the ethos of the stewardship rhetorician, characterized by submission to God and an unwillingness to coerce the other. Adopting this posture is an act of faith and discipleship because it only makes sense to one who knows that the sovereignty of the Powers has been broken. But the ethos of the stewardship rhetorician is also, like Weaver's and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, that of the parrhesiastes who speaks truth to power out of duty and in the context of risk to cultivate the reign of God within the church and beyond.

As we bring this essay to a close, we are reminded of the words of a seventeenth-century stewardship rhetorician, Thieleman van Braght, who endeavored to remind the acculturated Mennonites of his time of the need for a reinvigorated faith based in submission and cultivation. In the opening paragraph of the preface to *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, he warns his brothers and sisters in the faith that the story he has to tell is not pleasant, perhaps even irritating. He writes:

But most beloved, do not expect that we shall bring you into Grecian theatres, to gaze on merry comedies or gay performances. Here shall not be opened unto you the pleasant arbors and pleasure gardens of Atlas, Adonis or Semiramis. . . . True enough, we shall lead you into dark valleys, even into the valleys of death, where nothing will be seen but dry bones, skulls, and frightful skeletons of those who have been slain; these beheaded, those drowned, others strangled at the stake, some burnt, others broken on the wheel, many torn by wild beasts, half devoured, and put to death in manifold cruel ways; besides, a great multitude who having escaped death bear the marks of Jesus, their Savior, on their bodies, wandering about over mountains and valleys, through forests and wilderness, forsake of friends and kindred, robbed and stripped of all their temporal possessions, and living in extreme poverty.⁶⁴

To be sure, stewardship rhetoric is not for the faint of heart. It is no easier to speak than it is to hear and least of all to embody as an ongoing practice. But a cloud of witnesses has gone before us, whether Jesus, the martyrs, or J. Denny Weaver, to show us not only the way,

but that this way is the only way. As sisters and brothers in the body of Christ, we are called both to submission and to cultivation because, as the third-century church father Tertullian put it so concisely, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

NOTES

1. We have adapted this line from the song "South Bronx" on the album *A Retrospective* by KRS-One and Scott LaRock. KRS-One, *A Retrospective* (Jive Records, 2000).

2. Weaver characterizes the truth he offers and his relationship to it in the following manner: "Conversely, it is clearly a postmodern stance to point out the particularity of classic theology and to confess a truth with universal intent from the particular perspective of the Anabaptist peace church tradition that can critique Christendom's violence-accommodating theology." See J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press U.S., 2000), 27. It is worth pointing out here that Weaver's claim that the truth he espouses is particular is not contradictory to the claim that it is nevertheless true. Notice, that Weaver "confesses" rather than merely asserts this truth with universal intent. Thus, Weaver is not trying to have it both ways—that is, as both postmodern and modern. Rather, he is recognizing that all truths are particular while holding that some truths are actually true.

3. J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987), 202.

4. Our purpose in using this term is to underscore the degree to which Weaver's theology does not follow the rules or meet the expectations of traditional theology. In this sense, our use of the term resonates with Mark Taylor's use. We differ in our use of the term insofar as we do not mean to say that Weaver's is a negative theology. Clearly, Weaver's is not. See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern a/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

5. J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach, vol. 35, *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1997), 27.

6. J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 212.

7. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 7.

8. *Ibid.*, 93. For more argumentation along these lines, see Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 124-27.

9. Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 230.

10. Foucault's theorization here of the truth-teller resonates with his work on subject position. To put it all too briefly, a subject position or what Foucault also calls an I-slot is a space made available within a discourse that enables an

individual to speak but for the most part only in accordance with the rules of that space. Importantly, here Foucault is theorizing a subject position for resistance to the ruling truths. For his theorization of subject position, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 88-105.

11. In a footnote to this portion of text, editor Joseph Pearson notes that Foucault uses the masculine pronoun because he is referring there to *parrhesia* as it was understood and practiced in ancient Greek society which deprived women of the use of *parrhesia*. Since the context about which we are speaking is the twenty-first-century, we have decided to use a feminine pronoun in recognition of the fact that among us these days are female truth tellers. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 12.

12. Ibid., 14.

13. Ibid., 17.

14. Ibid., 17-18.

15. Ibid., 19.

16. Ibid.

17. Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 229.

18. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater Or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660*, 14th. ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 423.

19. Ibid.

20. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, 540.

21. Ibid., 6.

22. Anonymous, "The Word of God Is Solid Ground," in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, ed. Rebecca Slough (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), #314.

23. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14.

24. Ibid., 15.

25. With this sense of ethos we reclaim the etymological connection between *ethos* (habit, custom, disposition, character, and especially moral character) and *ethics*.

26. John Howard Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 21.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Walter Klaassen, Werner Packull, and John Rempel, eds., *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and His Circle* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1999), 29.

30. For a theological discussion of a radical epistemology of patience and vulnerability that rejects methodologism, see Chris Huebner, "Globalization, Theory and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76/1 (2002): 49-62.

31. Klaassen, et al., *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and His Circle*, 31.

32. In *Fearless Speech* Foucault writes about a variety of ancient Greek *par-*

rhesis from fifth-century BCE dramatists (Euripides) to fourth-century BCE philosophers (Socrates and Plato) to fourth-century BCE rhetoricians (Isocrates). The parrhesiastes he describes tend not to speak a truth that is on the move. While fifth-century BCE Sophists are well known for speaking truths on the move (indeed, this was Plato's primary accusation against them), Foucault does not include them in his argument. Thus, we identify this aspect of Anabaptist truth telling as distinctive.

33. For this citation and the remainder of the essay, all biblical references are to the NRSV.

34. According to Milo Kauffman's reading of biblical stewardship, "To recognize and acknowledge the ownership of God is a fundamental principle of Christian stewardship." Milo Kauffman, *Stewards of God* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1975), 37.

35. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 496.

36. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 21.

37. Surely one of the most famous disavowals of rhetoric appears in Plato's dialogues on rhetoric. For a discussion of this and other puzzles in Plato's works, see Jean Niemkamp, *Plato on Rhetoric and Language* (Mahwah, N.J.: Hermagoras Press, 1999), 1.

38. Hermann Diels and Rosamond Kent Sprague, *The Older Sophists: A Complete Translation by Several Hands of the Fragments in Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, Ed. Diels-Kranz and Published by Weidmann Verlag (Vaduz, Liechtenstein) (by Whose Permission the Translations Have Been Made): With a New Edition of *Antiphon and of Euthydemus* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 20.

39. This summary of Gorgias' position on being and not being is paraphrased from a fragment titled "On the Nonexistent or On Nature." *Ibid.*, 42-46.

40. *Ibid.*, 18.

41. As John Poulakos puts it in his essay, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric: 'In distinction to *episteme*, rhetoric does not strive for cognitive certitude, the affirmation of logic and, satisfied with probability, lends itself to the flexibility of the contingent.'" John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16/1 (1983): 37.

42. Diels and Sprague, *The Older Sophists: A Complete Translation by Several Hands of the Fragments*, 21.

43. This practice of making the weaker argument the stronger is readily seen in the extant speeches of the Sophists. For instance, in his speech, *The Choice of Heracles*, Prodicus (a fifth-century Sophist) challenges conventional wisdom about morality by articulating through a new rhetorical form a democratic subject of deliberation and decision-making in a context accustomed to patriarchal forms of decision-making based in the moral lessons of epic texts like *The Illiad*. Similarly, in his *Encomium of Helen*, fifth-century BCE Sophist, Gorgias, challenges the conventional view of Helen of Troy as a

woman who caused the Trojan War by her betrayal of her husband and, thereby, the Greeks. Gorgias makes the weaker argument offering four reasons why Helen cannot be blamed for the war. In so doing, Gorgias makes a case for the power of rhetoric in a context accustomed to relying on poetry for life's lessons. For readings of the weaker/stronger argument in these texts and their political implications, see Susan Biesecker-Mast, "Rhetorical Discourse and the Constitution of the Subject: Prodicus' *The Choice of Heracles*," *Argumentation* 5 (1991): 159-169 and John Poulakos, "Gorgias' *Encomium to Helen* and the Defense of Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 1 (1983): 1-16.

44. Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," 39.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Poulakos writes, "Moreover, the two examples [of sophistic rhetoric] seem to restrict speaking to only those times calling for it, and to suggest that silence be the alternative at all other times." Ibid.

48. Ibid., 40.

49. Poulakos writes about this dimension of rhetoric in the following way: "A complement to the notion of *kairos*, *to prepon* points out that situations have formal characteristics, and demands that speaking as a response to a situation be suitable to those very characteristics." Ibid., 41.

50. Ibid., 42.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 43-44.

53. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, 621.

54. Sandra Cronk, "Gelassenheit: The Rites of the Redemptive Process in Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite Communities," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 55/1 (1981): 5-44.

55. Robert Friedmann, "Gelassenheit," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, ed. Cornelius Krahn (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1982).

56. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, revised ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 25.

57. For Yoder's argument on this point, see "Christ and Power," in *The Politics of Jesus*. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 134-161.

58. As John Howard Yoder makes this point: "the powers have been defeated not by some kind of cosmic hocus-pocus but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon [the powers] is not the working of magical words nor the fulfillment of a legal contract calling for the shedding of innocent blood, but the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church which is itself a power and a structure in society. Thus the historicity of Jesus retains, in the working of the church as it encounters the other power and value structures of its history, the same kind of relevance that the man Jesus had for those whom he served until they killed him." Ibid., 158.

59. We are borrowing this notion of resisting the temptation to force history to come out right from John Howard Yoder, who made this point in a va-

riety of places including the following in which he offers a reading of Revelation 13:10: "The key to obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience (13:10). The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection." *Ibid.*, 232.

60. For a postmodern Anabaptist take on missiology, see Susan Biesecker-Mast, "The Aporetic Witness," in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, ed. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1999), 130-147.

61. In his *Mennonite Quarterly Review* essay on pacifist epistemology, Chris Huebner makes a similar call when he argues that "radical reformation consists of a dedicated willingness to subject one's own standpoint to criticism and a corresponding attitude of vulnerable openness to new and potentially hostile voices." Huebner, "Globalization, Theory and Dialogical Vulnerability," 60.

62. Anonymous, "Who Now Would Follow Christ," in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, ed. Rebecca Slough (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), #535.

63. Friedmann puts it this way: "Present-day Mennonitism has lost the idea of *Gelassenheit* nearly completely." Friedman, "Gelassenheit."

64. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, 6.