‘Getting the Reformation in America’—
The Making of Paul Lehmann as a Public Theologian

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I/ Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made two sojourns to America: the first as a visiting fellow at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1930-31; the second, lasting just over a month, in the summer of 1939. Arguably, Bonhoeffer encountered no one in America with whom he shared such invigorating theological rapport as Paul L. Lehmann. As Eberhard Bethge explains, ‘with Lehmann he could talk and argue; Lehmann understood the nuances of European culture and theology’ and thus ‘could understand why theological statements by both professors and students at the seminary were capable of making Bonhoeffer’s hair stand on end’.[12] Lehmann in return coveted Bonhoeffer’s theological companionship for both himself and American theology; indeed, throughout the 1930s Lehmann hoped Bonhoeffer would attain a professorship in the United States and contribute to ‘the shaking up of the American ‘theistic scenery’ as it was at the time’.[3]

After his final trans-Atlantic visit of 1939, Bonhoeffer composed an essay titled ‘Protestantism without Reformation’ reflecting on his encounters with Protestant Christianity in

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[1] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, E. Robertson (trans.) (London: Collins, 1970), p. 144. Cf., pp. 114-15: ‘He [Lehmann] was Bonhoeffer’s companion and loyal helper at the most important turning-point of his life’.

[2] Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 144.

[3] Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 115.

America.[4] Bonhoeffer observes that it is in the field of theology that 'there opens up an almost incalculably deep opposition' between the churches of Protestant Europe and those in America. He explains:

> God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom. He gave strong revivalist preachers, men of the church, and theologians, but no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ from the Word of God. . . . American theology and the church as a whole have never really understood what 'critique' by God's Word means in its entirety. That God's 'critique' is also meant for religion, for the churches' Christianity, even the sanctification of Christians, all that is ultimately not understood. . . . Christendom, in American theology, is essentially still religion and ethics.[5]

While evidently not dissociated from the cultural-historical phenomenon, the 'Reformation' of which Bonhoeffer speaks is fundamentally a theological reality, something God does to and with the church.[6] His conclusion is trenchant: absent such an understanding, 'the person and work of Jesus Christ recedes into the background for theology and remains ultimately not understood,

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[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Protestantism Without Reformation' in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, volume 15, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett, Claudia D. Bergmann, Peter Frick, Scott A. Moore and Douglas W. Stott. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), pp. 438-62. Christopher Morse reflected upon the abiding significance of Bonhoeffer's observations in 'The Need for Dogmatic Theology. Bonhoeffer's Challenge to the US in the 1930s and the 1990s,' *Ecumenical Review* 47:3 (1995): 263-67.

[5] Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 15, pp. 461-2.

[6] Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 15, p. 439.

because the sole foundation for God's radical judgment and radical grace is at this point not recognized'.[7]

Bonhoeffer here describes something of that 'theistic scenery'—the rather inhospitable contours of which were carved by the glacial forces of American Christianity and culture—which the young Paul Lehmann had hoped to join his German friend in upsetting. Any hope for such collaboration ended abruptly on the gallows during the murderous fury of the final days of the Third Reich. But Lehmann himself subsequently endeavoured to make good on the promise of this early vision. Indeed, Lehmann's ambition was to alter the 'theistic scenery' of American Protestantism by advocating a critical and publicly responsible Christian theology explosively concentrated upon the Word of God. Paul Lehmann's theological existence would be dedicated to 'getting the Reformation' in America. The purpose of the essay could be stated here or on page 5.

How fully Lehmann concurred with Bonhoeffer's assessment and vision is evident in a lecture he delivered at Eden Theological Seminary in 1939 titled 'The Predicament of Protestant Thought'.[8] The church, he says, is riven by the clash between two figures, the 'pious' and the 'good'. Faced with pressing questions of Christian responsibility for the world, the competing visions of these two figures generate 'unhappy suspicions which divide the contemporary household of faith between those who believe that the social impact of the gospel cannot wait upon individual conversion, and those who believe that if individuals are won over to the Lord Jesus Christ the social problem will take care of itself'. The conflict turns upon whether

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[7] Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 15, p. 462.

[8] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Predicament of Protestant Thought. The Theological Lectures at the Fifth Annual Convocation of Eden Theological Seminary' (Webster Groves, Missouri (*PLL Papers*, box 6, file 23, 125 pp.), 1939). Subsequent citations are from pp. 6- 7 of the typescript.

Christian faith is chiefly a matter of *religion* (piety) or of *ethics* (virtue). That each view should claim the support of 'the law and the prophets' only further 'confounds the confusion' since—as Lehmann bluntly contends—'the truth is that the law and prophets are both against both'. Only the recognition of such a divine judgment can begin to move the church 'beyond religion and ethics' so as to overcome the growing irrelevance of the debate within the Christian community about the 'social problem':

> If we start from *this* point we may discover again what repentance and redemption are and read aright the '*mene, mene, takel, upharsin*' (Dan 5:25) which stands inscribed above the high altar of every contemporary Church which is without exception, and with too much justification, being slowly and painfully repudiated by the princes of this world.[9]

Restating matters in terms evocative of Bonhoeffer's observations, he concludes:

> The common interests and concerns which bind us together as contemporary Protestants are as nothing compared with the fact that we are separated from the central insights of the Reformers into the relations of God and man. It is not a socio-historical problem we are facing, for there is no criterion in sociology or in history, sociologically considered, by which our actual unity and our actual division could be distinguished from their spurious counterparts. It is a theological problem in which we are involved.

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[9] Lehmann refers here to the infamous 'writing on the wall' of Daniel chapter 5 which prophesied the downfall of King Belshazzar after he had made use of the vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem as wine goblets during a feast; as the story is told, only Daniel himself is able to interpret the mysterious writing, and is thus promoted to high standing by the king.

It is engagement with *this* theological problem that promises to expose the church afresh to the Word of God which the Reformers identified with God's salutary judgment and grace in the person of Christ. Only in encountering this Word, Lehmann argues, can the identity of the Christian community, *and therefore* its social relevance and ethical responsibility for the world, be rightly discerned and enacted.

My overarching aim in what follows is to trace and analyse the chief contours of Lehmann's theology as it took shape over the first and formative three decades of his theological career, a period bracketed by the thesis he completed in 1930 to secure his first degree in theology from Union Theological Seminary and his inaugural lecture as Auburn Professor of Systematic Theology at his *alma mater* in 1963. For it was in the years between these two points that the future author if *Ethics in a Christian Context* (1963)and *The Transfiguration of Politics* (1975)developed the key elements of his enduring theological vision, and forged a distinctive perspective in Protestant 'public theology' *avant la lettre*.[10] During these three decades Lehmann taught a variety of theological disciplines—theology, ethics, and biblical studies— at a range of institutions—Elmhurst College, Eden Theological Seminary, Wellesley College, Princeton Theological Seminary, the Harvard Divinity School, as well as Union Theological Seminary—and produced a body of work significant in both scope and scale. My engagement with it here is necessarily selective, though I trust not arbitrary.

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[10] This focus means that the two monographs for which Lehmann is perhaps best known—*Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) and *The Transfiguration of Politics: The Presence and Power of Jesus of Nazareth in and over Human Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975)—fall outside our immediate purview.

I first consider Lehmann's engagement with and appropriation of the theology of Karl Barth during the 1930s and 40s. The way in which Lehmann understood Barth's contribution to be a recovery of the dynamic and dialectics of the theology of the Reformation—most decisively as regards the formative power of the person and work of Christ—proves to be very important. Equally significant is Lehmann's reception of Barth's account of the relation between the *Wort zur Lage*and the *Wort zur Sache*—i.e., between speaking to aspects of the present context or situation and speaking to the 'heart of the matter' by addressing the reality of the Christian gospel and fundamental theological issues. —as this was formulated during the tumultuous days of the *Kirchenkampf* in Germany. Sustained engagement with Barth's theology furnishes Lehmann with the basic perspective from within which he will later take up the question of the public responsibility of the Christian community.

Second, I analyse how Lehmann himself develops the signature motif of his own theological idiom: namely, concentration upon creaturely reality decisively shaped by the concreteness, dynamic and direction of divine activity as apprehended in the biblical witness. Lehmann appeals widely to the doctrines of election, Christology, justification and reconciliation in order to understand the context in which the question of Christian responsibility for social, political and cultural phenomena—i.e., public theological responsibility for 'the world'—arises. This is a tale of three inaugural lectures in which Lehmann discerns that the intelligible home of Christian responsibility for the world is where 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics' (Princeton, 1950) conspire with formative acknowledgment of 'The Formative Power of Particularity' (Union, 1963) to constitute 'The Context of Theological Inquiry' (Harvard, 1956).

Third, I briefly consider Lehmann's twin categories of *witness* and *catalyst*. By these terms Lehmann aims to fix attention upon what occurs at the intersection of the Christian

community and the world—or, better and more fundamentally, what occurs at the intersection of the Word of God and the world at which the Christian community stands sentinel. It is with concepts like these that Lehmann labours to articulate the particular way in which a properly evangelical church—i.e., a church self-consciously subject to that 'criticism by the Word of God' of which Bonhoeffer spoke—becomes a matter of public consequence as an advocate of what he styles a 'Protestant humanism'. The public valences of Christian difference are finally a consequence of the disciplined and integral exercise of the normative vocation of the Christian community. Theology exercises its public responsibility indirectly when it busies itself with clarifying this vocation and the precise nature of the intersection of church and world.

In conclusion I gesture at some implications of Lehmann's pursuit of a theological understanding of the church and of Christian difference 'beyond religion and ethics'. Just how might the perennial questions of church and society, Christianity and culture, Christian faith and social, cultural and political responsibility be recast within the ambit of such a comprehensive 'theology of christological concentration'?[11] Of what importance might Lehmann's formative insights yet be for current discussions of the problems and prospects of 'public theology'?

II/ GETTING THE REFORMATION IN AMERICA—GOING TO SCHOOL WITH KARL BARTH

'Come, sir, arise, away! I'll teach you differences. . .' [12]

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[11] See Jan M. Lochman, 'Toward a Theology of Christological Concentration,' in *The Context of Contemporary Theology. Essays in Honour of Paul Lehmann*, A.J. McKelway and D.Willis (eds.) (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), pp. 209-24.

[12] *King Lear* I, iv, 90-91.

Paul Lehmann took a passionate interest in the lively ferment of the European theological scene in the 1930s and 40s. He devoted particular attention to the early theology of Karl Barth. Indeed, Lehmann's earliest theological research and writing—both his B.D. (1930) and his doctoral theses (1936)—treated Barth's theology.[13] While not the origin of his acquaintance with Barth's thought, his close association with Bonhoeffer and several other European theological students during his graduate studies at Union did much to convince Lehmann of its richness and importance.[14] A recipient of the Fogg Travelling Fellowship from Union, Lehmann spent the academic years 1932-34 studying directly with two of the 'leading lights' of the new theological movement, Emil Brunner at Zürich and Barth himself, then at Bonn.

From the first, Lehmann associated the challenge of Barth's theology with the difficulty of 'getting the Reformation' in America:

> The historical meaning of the theology of Karl Barth is that it has attempted a different way of thinking theologically than any of us, not taught by him, have

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[13] Paul L. Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology to the Lutheran Doctrine of the 'Word of God'*, B.D. Thesis, (Union Theological Seminary, 1930) and *A Critical Comparison of the Doctrine of Justification in the Theologies of Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth*, Th.D. Thesis (Union Theological Seminary, 1936). A much revised version of the latter was subsequently published as *Forgiveness: Decisive Issue in Protestant Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940).

[14] In 1959, Lehmann would write to a colleague, 'It is not entirely correct that I attribute my introduction to Barth's theology on Bonhoeffer. What I do attribute to him is a more solid grasp of the substance of Barth's theology and the fact that this theology was concerned with living issues affecting the understanding and application of Christian faith.'—Paul L. Lehmann to John Godsey, 7 May 1959, *PLL Papers* (Princeton Theological Seminary Archives, Princeton, NJ), box 14, file 59.

> become accustomed to take. This is, moreover, not a new way, but an old one. It is the way on which the Protestant Reformation was launched. . . . Between that *old* way and Barth's *different* way stands all that is most characteristic and most significant in *our* way.[15]

The key element in both the *'old* Reformation way' and Barth's *'different* way' is the concept of the Word of God. Lehmann considered the difficulties '*our* way' of doing theology—i.e., the variegated Protestant liberalism then still regnant in America—had with this conception to be a significant obstacle. Yet Lehmann's own commitment to its importance for the future of theology could not be clearer:

> It is safe to predict, American theologians will never understand him until they begin where all theologians must begin, and where Barth has begun. The conception of the Word of God is still the beginning of correct theological thinking in Protestantism, the Word on which the Christian community in the world is grounded and by which the church lives in history.[16]

In the preface to his 1930 B.D. thesis, Lehmann cites two reasons for his own interest in Barth's theology: namely, a feeling that Barth's theology 'is perhaps as little understood as it is much debated' in North America and second—and more revealing—'a profound personal sympathy with the movement itself.'[17] Lehmann felt that Barth's theological project presaged a

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[15] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Understanding of Karl Barth,' unpublished paper read to the American Theological Society ((*PLL Papers*, box 6, file 22), 1937), p. 4.

[16] Lehmann, *Forgiveness*, p. 229.

[17] Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology,* preface.

way out of an increasingly theologically sterile situation paralyzed by a 'crisis of authority'. He writes:

> Fundamentalism has failed because it has chosen the wrong authority. Modern 'liberal' theology has tried the ingenious device of oscillation between any two of half a dozen or more authorities and, battered and limping, has landed in an authoritarian denial of any authority whatsoever. Whereupon, the Crisis theologians have bent their energies to the task of restoring religion by restoring theology, restoring it, indeed, to its only rightful place, back to its *theos* and His *logos*.[18]

It is recovery of founding interest in the '*theos* and His *logos'* that forges the relation between Barth and the Reformation and wins Lehmann's positive appreciation. Confronting a form of theology deemed 'no longer conscious of its province or its mission' Barth, like Luther, espies hope for renewal in a radical recovery of the very 'point of departure' and 'basis' of Christian theology in that '*positio sine qua non*, which it, by definition, deserves and must have'.[19] The main impetus is to re-establish a 'truly theological criterion for theological thinking'.[20] This criterion is not the biblical record as such—the error of the Fundamentalists—but rather what the Reformers spoke of as the Word of God: *verbum dei est dei loquentis persona*.[21]

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[18] Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology,* p. 25.

[19] Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology,* pp. 43, 26.

[20] Lehmann, 'The Understanding of Karl Barth,' p. 8.

[21] 'The Word of God is the person of God speaking'—Appeal to the Scriptures as 'Word of God', Lehmann observes, 'hinges upon the recognition of the object of that literature as identical with the object which the literature itself recognizes.'—Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology,* p. 35. The gap thereby opened up between God's salutary address and the

To speak of such a *positio* is to stress at once the *concreteness* and *priority* of the object of Christian faith. As to *concreteness,* theology sets out acknowledging that 'Christian preaching and Christian piety are not autonomous but governed by a definite sequence of ideas . . . born of the New Testament teaching about the meaning of Christ's coming in the flesh.'[22] Or, as Lehmann says elsewhere, 'the Christian Church ultimately rests, Schleiermacher to the contrary notwithstanding, on something else, less vague and insecure, something indeed quite specific and *particular*, the *authority* of Christ.'[23] As to *priority,* Lehmann argues that the dialectical character of Christian theology reflects the apperception of the Word of God as a dynamic, and not static, reality. The God of the gospel is not the passive object of our scrutinizing gaze, but an active agent of self-disclosure. The importance of this point of departure is not to be underplayed:

> The Word of God is original, pristine, primary. That is the first thing that is to be said about it. Monotonous though it is, it ought to be repeated again and again, for it is so very important and, strangely enough, so easily forgotten. Moreover, just to repeat it is about all that one can do for to say that the Word of God is primary is to say all that can be said. *Das Wort ist selbst ursprünglich*![24]

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written testimony to it—a gap that can only be crossed in one direction—forestalls any fundamentalist - literalist attitude towards the biblical witness in Lehmann's view.

[22] Lehmann, 'The Predicament of Protestant Thought,' p. 11.

[23] Lehmann, *A Critical Comparison of the Doctrine of Justification*, p. 95.

[24] 'The Word is itself originary'—Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology*, p. 34.

Barth's dialectical posture is neither expressionist semantics or rhetorical obscurantism. In Lehmann's view, it is what happens to theological discourse as it strains to do justice to the prevenient and agential character of its object.[25]

Both these emphases—*concreteness* and *priority*—are met in the person of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, who always 'stands as the *subject* of what is predicated by his appearance and its previous and subsequent acknowledgments'.[26] Taken together, the concreteness of the divine identity and the inexorable priority of divine agency opens a gap between the Word of God and the Christian community. Across this gap can spark the most fundamental and salutary criticism of the church and world, criticism whose radicality would be unthinkable in relation to the 'God, immanent in evolution, history and conscience' which the preceding century had made 'respectable'.[27]

In short, what Lehmann initially takes over from Barth's theology is a recovery of the Reformation's salutary concentration on the concreteness and priority of the Word of God for

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[25] Cf. Ibid., p. 26, especially the excursive footnote. Elsewhere Lehmann emphasizes the importance of this aspect of Barth's theology: 'By his dialectical elaboration of man's dependence upon God, he has removed from the theological horizon every vestige of God's dependence upon man and achieved the repudiation of the principle of polarity as a principle of Christian thought.'— Lehmann, *A Critical Comparison of the Doctrine of Justification*, p. 506.

[26] Lehmann, *The Historical Relation of Barth's Theology*, p. 38.

[27] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?' unpublished paper ((*PLL Papers*, box 5, file 24), 1934), p. 1. Elsewhere, Lehmann writes 'it belongs to the very core of [such] Pantheism that man speaks much of God but there is never any real discourse between them. For God is never distinct enough, and therefore powerless, to break the fascinating rhythm of the monologue of human thought.—Lehmann, *A Critical Comparison of the Doctrine of Justification*, p. 97.

Christian faith and thought. This brings with it a keen sense for the searching criticism of the Christian community by this same living Word. What underwrites the significance of Christian difference in the world —even as it undercuts it, as we shall see—is a 'principle of *discontinuity*':

> Revelation and history, faith and reason, grace and nature, the gospel and the world, are neither mutually exclusive nor supplementary. They are perpendicular to one another. This means that the central affirmations of the Christian faith are always both affirmed and denied in every historical moment. Only in so far as there is a sharp break between the gospel and the world are the redemptive act of the Creator and the faith of the redeemed genuinely new acts. Only the discontinuity between these two acts deals adequately with the freedom of the divine activity in a rebellious world.[28]

Going to school with Barth's theology meant coming to grips with the fundamental importance of this principle of discontinuity and the consequences of acknowledging the 'perpendicular relation' between God and the world.

Lehmann followed very closely Barth's involvement in the German *Kirchenkampf* throughout the 1930s. What was clear to Lehmann was that Barth's active and public criticism of the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* of the Protestant church was not in spite of but exactly because of his distinctive theological concentration.[29] Barth's most important account of the interrelation of his

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[28] Paul L. Lehmann, 'A Protestant Critique of Anglicanism,' *Anglican Theological Review* 26:3 (1944), p. 158.

[29] Lehmann, *Forgiveness*, p. 207 'It has simply not been true that Barth's theological emphasis has been indifferent to historical affairs . . . Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the fact that Barth's has been the loudest and loneliest voice in the wilderness of German totalitarianism preparing the way of the Lord. His own recovery of the task of theology and his faithfulness to

theological commitments and his public and political engagement during this period was the 1933 tract, *Theologische Existenz heute!*[30] Lehmann prepared a close exegesis of this text in 1934, and his exposition demonstrates his profound appreciation of its theological mainsprings. Lehmann fixes his attention upon one matter in particular which will prove to be decisive for his later own work: namely, the distinction and ordered relation of the timely word addressed to the situation [*zur Lage*] and the fundamental word addressed to the theological heart of the matter [*zur Sache*] in the exercise of theological responsibility towards the world. To cite Barth at some length, the key opening passage runs:

> For a good while back I have been frequently asked if I had nothing to say about the concerns and problems affecting the German Church nowadays. I can no longer ignore these requests . . . . If, dear friends at home and abroad, I have now been persuaded to speak 'to the situation,' [*zur Lage*] as it is expected of me, it can only be in the form of a question. The question is: 'Would it not be better if one did *not* speak 'to the situation,' *but*, each one within the limits of his vocation, if he spoke 'ad rem' [*zur Sache*]? In other words, to consider and work

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that task have preceded his stubborn resistance to German neo-paganism'. Cf. Lehmann's criticism of what he judges to be Reinhold Niebuhr's misunderstanding of Barth at precisely this point in *Forgiveness*, p. 227f. Barth's political activity in this period and its theological mainsprings is well documented by Mark R. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity. The Theological Basis of Karl Barth's Opposition to Nazi Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

[30] Karl Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day! A Plea for Theological Freedom*, R. Birch (trans.) (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933).

> out the presuppositions needed every day for speaking 'ad rem,' as it is needed today—not to-day for the first time—and yet it is needed today![31]

Lehmann seizes upon this juxtaposition of the '*zur Lage*' and the '*zur Sache*' as 'the perennial task and the perennial perplexity of [any] Christian theologian worthy of the name'. The bind arises from the need to speak 'to the former without jeopardizing the latter' and 'to the latter so that it may effectively determine the former'.[32] The stakes laid upon faithful negotiation of this task are high. For at issue is the identity and existence of the church and the salutary possibilities of Christian difference:

> The Church in the world! The Word of God in the Church—His Word which has 'for us no other name and content than Jesus Christ' . . . . This is ground for the distinction which Barth sees himself compelled to make at the beginning of the monograph. Were it otherwise, there would be neither situation to which to speak any word, nor any word to be spoken. Where it otherwise, the Church would become the Church of the world, and that which is so clearly world can scarcely any longer be Church.[33]

The 'fatal temptation' for the church is that, pressed by exigencies it will speak 'a word for the hour in such a way that she can only seal her doom by uttering it . . . . [thereby] muffling that essential word on which her own existence depends.'[34] Lehmann imagines the epitaph for such a

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[31] Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, pp. 10-11.

[32] Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', p. 5.

[33] Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', p. 7.

[34] Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', p. 9.

church: ‘The Church spoke to the world, being moved of the world, and for the sake of its existence in the world as part of the world’.[35]

And yet, that the church in the world ought to speak ‘to the situation’—that it ought to exercise human responsibility in view of current and pressing historical events—is a clear and inescapable claim. What requires decisive theological clarification, however, are the terms upon which this is to occur. In an idiom to be echoed throughout his later writings, Lehmann asserts:

> The Church exists in the world as really as anything else exists in the world. But the Church exists *in the world of the Word of God. This is the premise*. . . . Such a Church cannot be of the world because it is of the Word of God. But, *such a Church can be in the world because the Word of God is in the world.* And, *it has no other reality*.[36]

Note well—the church’s possibilities and obligations follow and are premised upon the reality of that ‘Word of God in the world’ which establishes the ‘world of the Word of God’. Whatever word and deed the church has to make in relation to the perplexities of world-historical occurrence, these arise within the sphere of possibilities brought about by the dynamic presence of the Word of God *already* constitutively in the world. The significant relation between the Word of God and any given historical situation is therefore not one which the Christian community and its theologians need strive to create; indeed, it is too late for this. Having already been created by the living Word of God itself, this relation now awaits the church’s discernment and attestation. That there is, in fact, such a significant relation to be discerned is an apperception of faith in Christ. In short, the struggle for faithfulness to the *Sache* of the church’s faith, impels

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[35] Lehmann, ‘Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?’, p. 9.

[36] Lehmann, ‘Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?’, p. 7 (my emphasis).

and compels its engagement with the actuality of the present situation in which it finds itself.[37] For not to be so engaged is, quite simply to have left off following the Word and thus to default upon the claim of Christian discipleship. In light of this, Lehmann considers Barth to have at least made this much plain:

> It is impossible to be moved by that situation *of itself* to speak in the name of the Church. This is suicide. For the Word of God (theology, the Church) is never determined *by* history (ethics, the State). If the Word of God is *in* history at all, it is history (ethics, the State) that becomes determined by it. I say 'if'. Can anyone have even begun to understand this tract for the time . . . and doubt that this 'if' is an emphatic 'is'?[38]

It short, the substance of the Christian gospel is itself concerned and engaged with every conceivable situation; to struggle to speak faithfully of and from this substance is thus to speak appropriately and effectively to the situation, not because one has been able to forge a link between the two, but rather, because one discerns the always already existing link between them by virtue of the eloquence of the Word in the world.

As early as 1934, Lehmann brings these insights to bear upon the contemporary situation of the American church. He writes,

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[37] He harbours no doubts that the church is so compelled: '*Verbum Dei maent in aeternum!* This is the beginning of all history, of all ethics, as well as of all theology. Can a church that understands this as the ground and the meaning of her existence ever be *of the world*? Of this Barth's monograph must surely have made us certain: such a Church will always be *in the world*.'—Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', p. 16.

[38] Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', pp. 15-16.

> It seems that by the grace of God alone American Protestantism has been spared the convulsions that followed for the German Church upon the blessing which they gave in common to the outbreak of bestiality, the twentieth anniversary of which we are now enduring. What has been happening during this 'grace period' is that the same disease has been as surely but not as dramatically ravaging the soul of the Church in this hemisphere . . . The embarrassment of the American Church is only less acute than that of her neighbor across the sea because the logic of world events has left the illusion easier to follow that similar decision can be delayed or perhaps even avoided. The one is the Church of victory and credit, the other the Church of defeat and debit.[39]

Disquiet about the anxious complacency of the church in America finds acute expression here. Lehmann ascribes the embarrassment, frustration and impotence of this church to its constant scramble immediately to speak a *Wort zur Lage*. For such a church, crowded pews at memorial services for German President Hindenburg are taken for a 'sign of health'; the measure of such a church is taken 'by the variety and extent of its program and the bulletin board' since, for such a church,

> . . . there is no segment of human activity with which the Church is not vitally concerned. It is equally irrelevant whether it ought to be so or not. For the Church is not interested in doctrine but in life. There is no interest of humanity

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[39] Paul L. Lehmann, 'A Decision Confronts the Church,' *Theological Magazine*, November 1934. The following citations are also drawn from this essay and cited from pages 5 -12 of the typescript in the Lehmann papers, *PLL Papers*, box 5, file 23.

> that is so secular but that it can be a little hallowed, and then gradually more so, by the patient but persistent effort of the Church.

The future of such a church turns upon ensuring that 'proper advertising and proper pedagogy' is marshalled to broadcast that its purposes are at one with those of the social and cultural moment, for in this way the church—like any social institution—shows itself to be indispensable to the production and fostering of the values of the human race. Lehmann caustically concludes that,

> the Church has become so intimately a part of the prevailing social pattern that she rises and falls in an astonishing parallelism with the stock market, and her only independent message is—listen to it still from any Christian pulpit on any Sunday morning—that she believes that Christianity is slowly but increasingly gripping the minds and motives of men. . . Her gospel has become largely a benediction upon human achievements.

Lehmann worries that the American church is walking in step with its troubled German cousin—even if to a rather more upbeat tune—though by keeping its head down has not yet noticed the direction in which the parade is headed. He worries that since 'we don't know any more why and of whom the Church exists in the world. We have lost our theological existence' it will be impossible to confront the challenges of the times 'with aught but the silence of the dead'.

What is to be done then? What can disrupt this deadly if amiable instrumentalization of the life and witness of the churches? The frenzied pursuit of *Wörter zur Lage* must give way to a hearing and a speaking of the *Wort zur Sache*, for

> a Church that is concerned about her own existence rather than about the Lord whom she serves will always take her harmony with the world more seriously than the world will take its harmony with the Church. The world is often glad for

> the co-operation of the Church, more often still will make a direct bid for it. But ultimately the world will have its way. [40]

The key insights of Barth's neo-reformational theology proved so compelling to Lehmann that by 1937 he could announce to his colleagues in the American Theological Society, 'I believe that the theology of Karl Barth has confronted other ways of writing theology with a critical decision upon which the immediate and future vitality of all Christian thinking may be said to depend. I venture to place my own theological thought at his disposal'.[41] Of course, by its very nature, following Barth could not mean simple repetition. As Lehmann would write to Barth some two decades later:

> As I have begun my work I have recalled many times a remark of yours as we talked in your study. You expressed the wish that theologians might each one work through the problems of dogmatics in his own way from the beginning. Whether I shall succeed or not I do not know, but I want you to know that this advice from you from whom I have learned so much and to whom I owe an unpayable debt will be the maxim of my labours here.[42]

Such formal counsel ever to 'begin again at the beginning' presupposed Lehmann's hearing of that earlier material counsel to attend with absolute seriousness to the *Wort zur Sache* in the doing of theology, i.e., 'never to lose sight of the only possible and real ground of theology'. As

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[40] Lehmann, 'Is the Theology of Crisis a Crisis Theology?', p. 8.

[41] Lehmann, 'The Understanding of Karl Barth,' p. 10 The passage continues, not insignificantly, 'But all the while I have been hearing and trying to keep in remembrance [Barth's] own likely paraphrase of what another decisive critic of modern times [i.e., Albert Camus] is reported to have said: '*je ne suis pas un Barthiste*.'

[42] Paul L. Lehmann to Karl Barth, 25 November 1956, *PLL Papers*, box 14, file 52.

Bonhoeffer would explain to Lehmann shortly after his own personal encounter with Barth in 1931, 'I do not have to tell you that this [ground] is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, truly a strange thing for a modern and intelligent man to concentrate his thoughts and his whole life upon'.[43] The practice of exactly this 'strange concentration' upon the living Christ marks Lehmann's abiding debt to Barth's theology, and constitutes the heart of the Reformation that Lehmann coveted for theology and the church in America.

III/ The Reality of redemption–the ethos of Christian responsibility

Jésus Christ est l'object de tout, et le centre où tout tend.

Qui le connaît, connaît la raison de toutes choses.[44]

To this point, I have argued that Lehmann took over from dialectical theology, as he put it, 'a fresh and contemporary understanding to the initiative and sovereignty of God, so that once again it is possible to think about the world and about human life in the world in the context of clearly formulated apprehensions of the divine activity'.[45] The ambition to provide just such a theological description of the 'context' of human life in the world and to draw out its consequences becomes a hallmark of all of Lehmann's subsequent work in theological ethics. His

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[43] This remark of Bonhoeffer's is reported *verbatim* in a letter Lehmann writes to Wilhelm Pauck in which he comments at length upon the latter's recently published study of Barth's theology, *Karl Barth–Prophet of a New Christianity?*—Paul L. Lehmann to Wilhelm Pauck, 2 December 1931, *PLL Papers*, box 2, file 37.

[44] Pascal, *Pensées*, §556. Translate the quotation here.

[45] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Theology of Crisis,' in *The Twentieth Century Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 1, L.A. Loetscher (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 311.

writings certainly betray no lack of interest in the social and political exigencies confronting the church—be they the shifting character of the post-war American universities, McCarthy-era politics, the challenge of global communism, or otherwise.[46] But another, finally more decisive, conception of 'context' is also at play. It involves faith's recognition and theology's display of what might be styled the 'metaphysical entailments' of the reality of redemption in Christ.

'Metaphysical' is perhaps not quite the right word. To the degree that it signals a reality claim of the highest order, it expresses an important aspect of Lehmann's concern; yet, insofar as it connotes final *stasis*, it may obscure the essential *dynamism* of the divine reality of the Word. Moreover, as the entailments of the enactment *of redemption*, they are inescapably purposeful, teleological and so also ethical and political in nature. At issue are the formative human consequences of the 'concreteness, dynamics and direction of the biblical apprehension of divine activity in the world'.[47] His preferred shorthand for all this is often simply the *'the politics of God*'. As a theological category, Lehmann was fond of saying, 'politics' has an Aristotelian definition and a biblical description—according to its *definition* it denotes 'that activity, and reflection upon activity, which aims at and analyses what it takes to make and to keep human life

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[46] Cf. from this period 'Christianity and Community,' lecture (Chapel Hall, NC: Committee on Convocations and Lectures of the University of North Carolina, 1947); 'Truth is in Order to Goodness,' *Theology Today* 6:3 (1949), pp. 348-60; *Your Freedom is in Trouble* (New York: National Student Council of the YMCA and YWCA, 1954); 'Civil Liberties,' *Christianity and Society* 17:2 (1952), pp. 5-6; 'The Mindzenty-Spellman Case,' *New Century* (Spring 1949), pp. 11-14 and *Ideology and Incarnation: A Contemporary Ecumenical Risk. The Seventh Annual John Knox House Lecture, June 15th, 1962* (Geneva: John Knox Association, 1962).

[47] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 22 (1957), p. 72. Cf. 'On Keeping Human Life Human,' *The Christian Century* 81:2, no. 43 (1964), pp. 1297-99.

human in the world'; according to the biblical *description*, this humanizing labour has as it *sine qua non* 'the unsearchable riches of Christ. . . the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things' (Eph. 3:8-9)'.[48] The politics of God is, then, that purposeful pattern of divine agency, focussed in the figure of Christ, which enacts and unveils the true destiny and fulfilment of the human creature in the world. Attention to this politics and the world it makes constitutes the basic *ethos* of Christian life.

In this section I briefly analyse Lehmann's varied efforts in early and mid-career to expound this notion of the politics of God, an idea that finally comes to name *the* context within which questions of Christian public engagement and responsibility are both inescapably raised, and authentic and intelligible answers risked. We concentrate upon the texts of Lehmann's three inaugural lectures of 1950, 1956 and 1963, which, taken together, fairly and judiciously articulate Lehmann's overriding contention that,

> God is acting to achieve the fulfilment and the deliverance of man's life in this world. What counts is the dynamic relationship between God and man—God always on the move, making and keeping man abreast of himself and his purposes. . . [in short, that] the basic situation is that the judgment of Christ is already at work. This is how the human situation really is.[49]

Whatever the concrete exercise of Christian public responsibility will finally look like, it will take shape within the context of this reality and be *en rapport* with it.

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[48] Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, p. 85; Cf. Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' paper presented at the Ecumenical Institute (Bossey, Switzerland, 1958), pp. 7-8.

[49] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Deliverance and Fulfilment: The Biblical View of Salvation,' *Interpretation* 5:4 (1951), p. 395, and 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' p. 11.

What fuels the 'Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' to which Lehmann addresses himself at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1950, is the δύναμις of the triune God. The 'moving strength' of the divine constitutes the 'overtones and undertow of biblical experience' formative for Christian imagination, and fixes the attention of the people of God 'upon the future for God's next move.'[50] The lecture describes the context of Christian responsibility in *temporal* terms. 'The unique disclosure and vitality of Christian faith,' Lehmann declares, is that 'responsibility for and towards the future is determined by the frontiers of the present.'[51] The revolutionary insight of the Reformers was to see that God's act of gracious justification of sinners makes the present a frontier laden with promise—i.e., a present with a genuine future—rather than the mere terminus of past occurrence. The reality of reconciliation, that is, makes the present into that time in which God can be known and obeyed anew, and this because 'the presence and power of God in Christ' renders it a moment 'where the new possibilities of life. . . cut across the outworn patterns of the past'.[52] As he says elsewhere, to reckon with one's justification is 'to move into a new order and a new sovereignty which are not yet triumphant but which are nevertheless real and effective'.[53]

It is because God is the *pre-supposition* and *initiative of* our experience and reflection (and not an inference from it), that the church tenses forward in this way. Consequently, attention fixes upon 'the shape of things to come in dedicated expectation of fresh and purposeful

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[50] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 43:4 (1950), p. 18.

[51] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 18.

[52] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 22.

[53] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Standpoint of the Reformation,' in *Christianity and Property*, ed. J. Fletcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 102.

manifestations of God's moving strength'.[54] The frontiers of the present are ultimately a function of the 'moving strength of God which anchored itself in Jesus Christ in the perpetual present wherein the future meets and fulfils the past by transforming it'.[55]

This last proposition recasts the Reformation emphasis upon the concreteness and provenience of divine agency in decidedly temporal categories: the divine δύναμις is not sheer caprice, because its identity is 'anchored' in the enactment of an existence in time, namely that of Jesus Christ; neither is it trapped in the past because the event of its temporal 'anchoring' makes itself contemporary to every present as the power of forgiveness, thus constituting it a promise-laden frontier.[56] The point of this language of temporality is to make clear that to be redeemed is not to have arrived but rather to have been set in motion in a particular way. As Lehmann writes, to be redeemed is 'to discern and to move across the line between the possibilities which are played out and those which are full of promise'.[57] The concrete identity and consequence of the δύναμις of the God of the gospel in the world means significantly that a properly Protestant account of the theological concept of 'order of things' will never be conservative in its entailments.[58] The eschatological qualification of such an 'order' precludes any and all such

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[54] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 19.

[55] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 18.

[56] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 19. The doctrines of incarnation, resurrection and ascension underwrite such notions.

[57] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 18.

[58] '. . . it is in openness and change—not in the status quo—that men are to discern the moving strength of God.'—Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 20. Significantly in this essay, as elsewhere, Lehmann sees that the Reformers themselves 'drew back from the dynamics of their own ethical foundations' and instead, 'barricaded the dynamics of the community of the

stasis. Said differently, as a consequence of the identity and activity of God the 'order' of redemption is itself ever a *dandum* and never a simple *datum*—ever a 'giving' and never simply something given. For this reason, its effects in the world are destabilizing. It is because the event of justification 'rests upon the incarnation and atonement, and not upon the creation' that Lehmann sees it is 'revolutionary' such that 'the believer in the God who acts and who calls, who creates and who redeems, always begins by moving against the focus of power in the existing situation'.[59]

It is Lehmann's contention that an adequate account of the ethos of Christian faith will be 'an analysis of theological order according to which the moving strength of God is on the side of social change,' as the 'herald of 'things which are not, to bring to nought things that are' (1 Cor 1:28)'.[60] The Christian community will thus discern the ontic effect of theological order of redemption in the world in, 'the integration of the premises and the institutions of social life so that responsibility for what is going on is continually exercised in the direction of self-criticism. Whenever in human affairs, responsibility for what is going on is identified with self-justification, then, disorder has become the order of the day'.[61] Such discernment demands the variegated work of reflecting upon, advocating and applying 'the presuppositions, the character,

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justified behind the familiar but cracking bulwarks of an order that the moving strength of God had set aside. They fell back upon the ancient tradition of natural law. . .' (p. 22).

[59] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Towards a Protestant Analysis of the Ethical Problem,' *The Journal of Religion* 24:1 (1944), p. 16. Development of the consequences of this insight will particularly preoccupy Lehmann in later years, and culminate in his 'theological hermeneutics of revolutionary politics' *The Transfiguration of Politics*.

[60] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 22.

[61] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 20.

and the responsibilities of theological order' such that the church becomes a 'community of experiment'.[62]

Critical here is how the church's orientation in and towards the world is, for Lehmann, won by means of an account of the 'world of the Word of God'. The *theological* description of this 'context' within which the interaction of church and world occurs is of immense practical importance. The faithfulness and effectiveness of efforts to engage a situation *Christianly* are, in Lehmann's view, a function of the degree to which we are able to discern and 'keep abreast of' the dynamic and determinant reality of the Word of God already at work in the world to 'make all things new'. Integral to such a view is constant anticipation of 'criticism by the Word of God'. In fact, it is precisely such criticism—concretely, the judgment and forgiveness encompassed by the event of justification—that drives the Christian community forward and across the frontier of 'social change', a recurrent feature of the *ethos* of Christian life.

The 1956 Harvard inaugural lecture, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry' modulates the discussion into the spatial categories of 'centre' and 'periphery'. Lehmann takes his cue from a question Emerson put on the docket of the Harvard 'Society for Extemporaneous Speaking' in 1825: 'Is it expedient, in consideration of the spirit of the age, that a minister should be a profound theologian?' Perhaps, he muses, given the spirit of the present age the question might

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[62] Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics,' p. 22. As he writes elsewhere, 'the *koinonia* is a kind of laboratory of humanization in the world. Here, an experiment is continually going on in bringing the concrete stuff of action into dynamic and concrete relation to a perspective upon action. The perspective is God's action in the world to make men free to be the selves who God intended them to be, through the humanizing results of the way men behave.' Paul L. Lehmann, 'Contextual Ethics,' in *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, J. Macquarrie (ed.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), p. 73.

well be whether it is expedient that Christian pastors be theologians *at all*, let alone profound ones.[63] In explaining his own (ultimately positive) reply to this question, Lehmann says much about theology's relation to the life of the church. Without theological capacity and discipline, he contends, there can be no integrity to ministerial vocation, since it is 'the office of theology' to provide critical tools by means of which Christian faith 'tests the spirits' (1 Jn 4:1) as it engages 'on that line of battle where the peripheral and the central problems of human knowledge, and the proximate and ultimate questions of human life are discerned and distinguished'.[64] Sensitivity to 'the dynamic reality which underlies and forges the link between theology and existence' is the issue here, and so with it, sensitivity to the 'differentiating claim' under which Christian theology always proceeds.[65]

To best serve and support these sensitivities, Lehmann argues, theology will proceed 'contextually'. The Reformers, we are told, set theology on such a contextual course by owning the conviction that theology 'is not deprived of the fullest resources of the critical reason when the knowledge of faith is recognized as intrinsic to the rational exposition of truth'. On the basis of this conviction, they occupied themselves with 'the mystery and the majesty of the context of reality within which the truth in Christ, and the inquiry concerning the truth about man and the world, continually and critically occurred'.[66] This context has a centre—'the ways of God with men *in* the world'—and it has a periphery—'the ways of men with God *and* the world'. The biblical witness expounds the centre as 'the historical self-disclosure of God in revelatory

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[63] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 63.

[64] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 65.

[65] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' pp. 65-66.

[66] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' pp. 68-69.

instruction and action,' whose most concrete locus is that One whose person and action bears 'the secret of personal, communal and cosmic existence and fulfilment,' namely, Jesus Christ. The promise of the periphery is 'the possibility and power to live responsibly and to make sense out of life' in relation to *this* centre.[67]

A theology self-consciously oriented to centre and periphery in their constitutive relation, promises to be 'more fruitful of insight and understanding concerning how things *are* and *operate*' in Lehmann's view because it admits its own 'involvement in a dynamic theatre of reality and in a point of view'.[68] What takes place at the periphery—including theological reflection itself—is ever 'subject to the steady pressure of a God who acts to create and redeem, to establish and to renew'. The effect of this creative and redemptive pressure from the centre is decisive:

> A contextual theology is. . . always prepared to be upset by the jagged edge of some noetic perpendicular by which its analyses are shattered and in consequence of which the pieces and patterns of a theological account of what is going on in the world must be picked up and put together again. This means that theological knowledge, like non-theological knowledge, and like faith itself, is always under the excitement of change and on the threshold of some fresh apprehension of truth.[69]

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[67] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 71. He points to Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 1 to exemplify this claim.

[68] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 69.

[69] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 70.

In other words, the dynamic reality of the centre at once establishes and unsettles the goings-on around the periphery. The decisive instance of being upset by a 'noetic perpendicular' (recalling Barth's 'perpendicular relation' between God and the world) occurs when the periphery is effectively subject to realignment in relation to, and by virtue of, the dynamic of the centre, i.e., at those moments when actuality succumbs to the 'steady pressure' of God's redeeming activity.

In taking as its structuring materials the 'concreteness, dynamics and direction of the biblical apprehension of divine activity in the world,'[70] the kind of theology Lehmann is advocating is exposed to constant criticism by its own object. Moreover, in fixing attention upon *this* centre, theology subsequently finds its attention drawn out towards a periphery which includes both the Christian community as well as 'the whole compass and corpus of goings on in heaven and earth'.[71] Again, as the image of movement indicates, theology ever finds itself thinking 'in the wake of' the Word of God, always following after, its function to re-describe and to discern afresh. Lehmann identifies this insight into the character of theological inquiry as 'a signal gift of the Reformation to the Christian Church and to the enterprise of human inquiry'.[72]

In both these lectures, Lehmann expounds the formative *ethos* of Christian theology and life by offering a theological account of what faith apprehends to be the reality of redemption—or the 'world of the Word of God'—first in temporal, and then again spatial categories. The overriding concern in both instances is to draw attention to the way in which the Word of God in its concreteness, dynamism and purposefulness structures the reality within which the Christian community asks and answers the question of its responsibility in and for the world.

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[70] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 72.

[71] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 72.

[72] Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry,' p. 72.

In ‘The Formative Power of Particularity,’ his 1963 inaugural lecture at Union Theological Seminary, Lehmann again presses into this complex of themes. This time he stresses the seminal and critical power that accrues to theology by virtue of the particularity—i.e., what he elsewhere calls the concreteness—of the divine identity. Christian theology is always concerned with ‘responding to a limiting condition of a quite particular kind,’ Lehmann writes, and is done ‘in a specific context of occurrences and relationships’ which determines its task. The ‘specific context’ imagined is quite richly described here. To cite Lehmann at some length:

> What we have in mind is the obvious evidential setting in which Christian theology has always been done, of which theology is an intrinsic expository and critical function. This setting consists of a community, a *kerygma*, a canon, a dogmatic configuration—and above all—a revelatory phenomenon, identified with Jesus of Nazareth, identified as Jesus Christ. In dynamic and dialectical relation with this revelatory action of God, these other concrete phenomena become theologically luminous. Apart from this revelatory action of God, these other concrete phenomena are theologically unimportant. Indeed, apart from this revelatory action of God, Jesus Christ himself is theologically unimportant.[73]

The specific work of theology in this setting is to exercise an ‘expository and critical responsibility for the risk of particularity’. This follows from recognition that whatever importance theological discourse might have in the world it has finally as a consequence of the ‘dynamic and dialectical’ agency of God. Theology, that is to say, ‘steadfastly adheres to the task of explicating the event which has changed the face of reality, and the bearing of this event upon

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[73] Paul L. Lehmann, ‘The Formative Power of Particularity,’ *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 18: 3, pt.2 (1963), p. 312.

the human condition, upon man himself and in the social and natural world of which he is a part,' being all the while 'embarrassed by the risk of particularity,' even when prepared to make it.[74]

The point Lehmann is making is that Christian theology is a wager whose only ground is faith's trust in 'the promise and power of God' which attaches to the person and work of Christ.[75] For this reason, he speaks of the 'risk of particularity in the power of particularity' as a 'mandate of Christ' which arises out of,

> expository integrity toward the original and originary revelatory phenomenon, not merely *called* Jesus Christ, but actual and concrete in him. This phenomenon is not simply a presupposition of theological reflection and interpretation. This phenomenon is the one critical surrender of the neutral to the personal in the *arcanum* of historical investigation and verification . . . The apostolic conviction is that Jesus Christ Himself draws the boundary [of scepticism] in drawing which, He draws us from our side to His.[76]

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[74] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' pp. 307, 313. Lehmann admits there can be no theoretical compensation for this embarrassment aggravated as it is by 'insistent historical scepticism'.

[75] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' p. 317. This echoes Lehmann's early observations in relation to Barth's theology: 'It may suffice for the understanding of [Barth's theology], if so much is plain, namely, that. . . 'Dogmatics' he says, 'is a task of faith'. And if the theologian imagines either that he can, or that he does believe in the Lord Jesus Christ apart from the Church of the Word and the Sacraments, then, it is he, and not Barth, who is esoteric and obscure'. Lehmann, 'The Understanding of Karl Barth,' pp. 9-10.

[76] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' p. 317.

This attitude of expectant embarrassment he here calls a 'naive realism', where 'naive' denotes neither innocence nor ignorance but 'sensitivity to 'a new order already begun',' which, as Calvin considered, is to be glimpsed only in the mirror that is Christ.[77] Of this attitude, Lehmann writes,

> What we wish to stress is the self-evidence with which in the New Testament, the revelatory actuality of Jesus Christ was recognized and related to ordinary and ultimate experience in and of the world. It is this self-evidence which is so difficult for us to understand and to employ today. Nevertheless, the expository and critical interpretation of this self-evidence is a primary task of systematic theology.[78]

What is at stake is what, on an earlier occasion, Lehmann spoke of as 'the question of the integrity of Christian decision,' i.e., the question concerning 'the kind of thinking which the affirmation of the gospel occasions and requires in the world'.[79] The awkward naiveté which Lehmann here assigns to theology is a function of its integrity in relation to the gospel whose reception and affirmation is its mainspring.

The upshot of all this is that theology is cast in a particular role vis-à-vis other modes of human inquiry. By running the risk of particularity for the sake of keeping faith with the God of the gospel, theology takes up one of the roles which 'for his own reasons, and in another time, Socrates reserved for philosophy', namely the maieutic role of attending to the birth-traumas of the 'authentic humanistic promise' of the whole human enterprise.[80] Christian theology perceives

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[77] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' p. 317.

[78] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' p. 319, note 16.

[79] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Obedience and Justice,' *Christianity and Society* 8:3 (1942), p. 35.

[80] Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity,' p. 318.

the human enterprise to be pregnant with such humanistic promise by virtue of its expectation of the 'messianic liberation and transformation' of that enterprise towards its true end, which is, as the Calvinist catechisms have long said, the chief end of all human existence, namely the glorification of God. Again, the trope of midwifery points up the way in which theology does not effect, but merely attends, that which is already occurring, in this case the humanization of persons under the 'steady pressure' of the Word of God in the world. Once again, the prevenience and purposeful nature of divine agency find significant expression.

To appreciate Lehmann's theology aright requires that we grasp the way his unfolding of the entailments of faith's apprehension of the reality of redemption in the person and work of Christ at one and the same time *heightens* and *effaces* the difference between church and world at whose intersection the question of Christian responsibility and engagement in public affairs arises. Certainly, concentration upon the peculiar content of the apprehension of Christian faith and the sorts of judgments about the way things are that follow from it, serve to heighten Christian difference. The theology Lehmann advocates is a mode of discourse and reflection to which Christians *qua* Christians are summoned with a distinctive grammar and pattern of intelligibility. The theologian, as Lehmann once remarked, is hence 'neither an accident, nor a volunteer, but *a conscript*, which is to say, *a believer*' engaged in providing an account of the world as it appears in light of the apprehension of the God of the Christian gospel.[81] To heed this summons and assume this vocation is to step into Auden's 'Land of Unlikeness' and so to expect and to own the embarrassment entailed thereby.

But it is no less important to see distinctly that, in Lehmann's view, this same 'objectivity' of the reality of redemption also profoundly *effaces* the significance of the difference

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[81] Lehmann, 'The Understanding of Karl Barth,' pp. 9-10 (emphasis added).

between church and world in a singularly important way. Given the theological emphases at play, it is the human situation *per se*—and not the especial Christian situation—that has been brought about and is being shaped by what God has enacted in Jesus Christ. Lehmann considers that, 'the death of Christ and the life which he now lives unto God are the great redemptive actions and facts about the world. These facts and this reality are not a condition of man's decision to believe, to do something, not even to repent. Faith, repentance, doing, are responses, if they are authentic, to this reality'.[82] The church in no way gives rise to, or circumscribes the effectiveness of the redemptive work of the Word of God in Christ. It is itself subject to relentless criticism by the Word of God, and so not a stable (let alone sacral) entity, theologically considered. As Bonhoeffer once observed, in speaking of the church one must always bear in mind that 'this space has already been broken through, abolished, and overcome in every moment by the witness of the church to Jesus Christ'.[83]

So Lehmann understands that all humanity is implicated in the situation defined by the gospel but that those in the Christian community 'are in special trouble' since they are additionally made responsible for showing in their conduct 'how the living presence of Jesus Christ and human fulfilment go together'.[84] There is then no 'baptismal monopoly' on the dynamic effectiveness of the divine reality in the world: baptism is but our ordination to faith's responsibility.[85] Whatever the nature of the boundary between church and world, it will *not*

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[82] Lehmann, 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' pp. 10-11.

[83] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, volume 6, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, C. Green (ed.) and I Tödt et. al (trans.) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 64.

[84] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Law as a Function of Forgiveness,' *Oklahoma Law Review* 12:1 (1959), p. 105.

[85] The phrase is Lehmann's own—see 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' p. 12.

involve demarcating a sphere of world-historical occurrence within which the concreteness, dynamic and direction of divine activity occurs from one in which it is effectively absent. Addressing himself to this, Lehmann writes in a significant passage:

> Christ's redemptive presence in the world is at least a double one. . . . The one way is the fellowship of Christ's body which is the Church, in all the hiddenness and visibility of this phenomenon in the world. Why it occurred to God to deal with His secret in this way, I shall never know. . . . But, for better or for worse, God has arranged it in this way, and thereby aggravated, rather than assisted, the *scandalon* of His incarnation.[86]

But there is yet another mode in which the redemptive presence and pressure of the Word of God is manifest in the world:

> It may be called the way of the 'signs, and wonders, and mighty works' . . . . For 'truly God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fear Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him' (Acts 10:34). This 'acceptable' happens, I would think, just in Christ, and not because of natural theology. This 'acceptable' happens wheresoever and however the concrete stuff of human relatedness erupts into an act in and through which a man becomes a human being with and in and through his fellow man.[87]

It is the world acknowledged to be the 'world of the Word of God,' and *not* the church, which is the sphere in which Christian faith discerns and affirms that the politics of God are afoot. Theological recognition of the reality constituting character of the identity and agency of God

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[86] Lehmann, 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' p. 12.
[87] Lehmann, 'The Politics of God and the Spinning Top,' pp. 12-13.

sharply transforms the boundary between church and world into a different sort of boundary than it is generally taken to be, signifying something other than it is generally taken to signify. It is a boundary of primarily *vocational* and not necessarily *salvific* significance. Said differently, the boundary between church and world marks out that sphere in which humans are *made peculiarly responsible* for the blessings which ensue from the concreteness, dynamics and direction of divine agency, blessings the reality of which are not in any way restricted to this sphere. This fact ensures that the Christian community is ever 'experimental' in tenor since 'it is experimenting along with the world in the recovery of the fact and promise of God's reconciling act in Christ'.[88]

In short, a fundament of Lehmann's formative public theology is that 'the line between the gospel and the world is never identical with the line between the Church and the world.'[89] And it is on this transformed boundary between church and world that Lehmann contends the real significance of Christian difference emerges in relation to the question of public responsibility and engagement 'in a world defined . . . by the fact that Jesus is the truth.'[90]

III/ Witnesses & Catalysts—The Public Valences of Christian Difference

And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking;
our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit
but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present.[91]

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[88] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Renewal in the Church,' *Theology Today* 7:4 (1951), p. 479.

[89] Lehmann, 'A Protestant Critique of Anglicanism,' p. 158.

[90] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Theological Notion of Truth' (Bossey, Switzerland, 1955), p. 3.

[91] W.H. Auden, 'For the Time Being. A Christmas Oratorio,' *Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 390.

Our examination of Lehmann's theological programme to this point raises the following question: if the publicity of God (if such a phrase be allowed to denote the reality of 'purposeful presence and power of the Word of God in the world') is the *presupposition* and *initiative* and not the goal of Christian speaking and acting in and for the world, then how ought such speaking and acting to be characterized and what is its point? In answer, Lehmann speaks of the 'parabolic witness' of the Christian community, as well as of the 'catalytic function' of its words and deeds. 'Witness' and 'catalyst' designate ways in which Christians enact with integrity their identity as 'members of a company on the move, straining to keep up with God'.[92] As both witnesses and catalysts, both individual believers and Christian communities humanly serve the ongoing salutary activity of God, itself directed, as we have seen, at 'making and keeping human life human in the world'. Conceived as witness and catalysis, the task enjoined upon the church by the reality of Christian difference is, Lehmann suggests, one of enacting and advocating a 'Protestant humanism'.

Pursuit of such humanism is, in Lehmann's view, a necessary consequence of 'getting the Reformation in America'. In fact it involves assuming responsibility for a task left unfinished (owing to a loss of theological nerve) by the Protestant Reformation itself, namely 'the displacement of a *corpus christianum* by a *corpus humanum* as the context of culture'.[93] As Lehmann writes,

> I look for a Protestantism imaginative enough, self-critical enough, sober enough to permeate the culture of the future not from the dominant but the

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[92] Lehmann, 'Biblical View of Salvation,' p. 398.

[93] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture,' The James W. Richards Lectures in Christian Religion at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA, 1958), I, 19.

> sectarian center of its own life. By the sectarian center of its own life, I do not mean a center of divisiveness but the kind of center of its own life that understands what our Lord himself meant by the mustard seed, by the grain that must fall into the ground and die, by the leaven in the lump.[94]

The rather extraordinary contention here is that rightly understood, the material heart of Christian difference—the concreteness, dynamics and direction of divine agency in Christ—enjoins the humanistic task upon the Christian community, precisely because it effaces the very boundary between church and world, which it might well be expected to fortify. In the terminology of an earlier discussion, it is Lehmann's considered view that due theological attention *zur Sache* renders the Christian community profoundly, inescapably—*because Christianly*—responsible *zur Lage* in humanistic ways and toward humanistic ends. The boundary between church and world 'is the line at which the issue of the authority and independence of the gospel has become the issue of the responsibility of believers in the gospel for the world'.[95] And it is here that the Christian life is staked upon 'the mysterious inexorability of the concrete and discreet particularity of the divine self-disclosure and of human involvement'.[96]

That the public responsibility of Christians can be understood in terms of *witness* follows from the affirmation of the prevenient reality and activity of God as a logical correlate. Once faith apprehends God to be the initiative and pre-supposition of reason and experience, then reason and

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[94] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Protestantism in a Post-Christian World,' *Christianity and Crisis* 22:1 (1962), p. 10.

[95] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Direction of Theology Today,' *The Duke Divinity School Bulletin* 11:4 (1947), p. 75.

[96] Lehmann, 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture,' I, 30.

experience themselves are laid open as potential sites of faithful (and unfaithful) human response. As Lehmann, explains, 'Henceforth I belong to God and know what I have to do. I have to bear witness to the fact that God has given himself to me and taken me in—as I am—by giving myself to and taking in my neighbour—as he is. God not only gives Himself to me in the act of justification but also expects something from me'.[97] In a similar vein, Bonhoeffer can write,

> the first task given to those who belong to the church of God is not to be something for themselves, for example, by creating a religious organization or leading a pious life, but to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world.[98]

Witness, then denotes faithful human response, self-conscious of its origin in God's prevenient activity; that is, it is speech and action which, as it corresponds in a human way to the character and direction of divine activity, attests the presence of the latter in the midst of the world. The perspicacity of such witness is a matter of great concern for the church. Given that 'the criterion of obedience or disobedience,' as Lehmann argues, 'is symbolic,' everything depends upon whether the human words and actions point to the righteousness and grace of God militant in the world, or not.[99] Likewise, the institutions and forms of life adopted by the Christian community find their critical criterion here as well since, in faith, all procedures and structures are neither self-justifying nor self-fulfilling but radically instrumental and symbolic.[100]

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[97] Lehmann, 'Towards a Protestant Analysis of the Ethical Problem,' p. 6.

[98] Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 6, p. 64.

[99] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Christian Faith and Civil Liberties,' *Social Progress* 43:4 (1952), p. 8.

[100] Lehmann, *Your Freedom is in Trouble*, p. 35: 'It is this symbolic and instrumental role of political procedures and structures that makes for the kinship between Christianity and democracy'.

Hence, the witness provided by the Christian community in its moments of faithfulness will correspond to and befit the humanizing direction of God's own avowed agency in the world, as well as its critical and disruptive character. In both respects it attests the concreteness of God's identity in Christ as salutary judge and redeemer:

> The witness of the Church is a two-fold witness: by its preaching it provides men with nourished faith and hope and with quickened consciences; by its challenge to all vain sovereignties and by its championing of all victims of vain sovereignties, it embodies the kingly sway of the Lord both over the Church and over civilization.[101]

The priority of God's agency, as this remark indicates, is also expressed in the church's acts of witness, not always—and perhaps not even primarily—in direct communication. Rather, the very manner of Christian witness, its humility, expectation and embarrassment, attest it. Since the Christian community is finally founded in and lives by the forgiveness of sins, it gives clear and faithful expression to this insofar as in its own disposition it 'bears witness in word and deed to the form of a servant which God in Christ assumed'.[102] That is to say, faith's affirmation of the present presence of the Word of God sets the church into a posture of service. So Lehmann writes, Christ 'to be sure, is on location in the Church. But the Church does not rule in his name, he rules the Church and by his rule in and over the Church' as a consequence of which 'the Church bears witness'.[103] In all this it becomes clear that as an expression of the responsibility

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[101] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Bible and the Significance of Civilization', *Theology Today* 5:3 (1948), p. 357.

[102] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Servant Image in Reformed Theology', *Theology Today* 15:3 (1958), p. 338.

[103] Lehmann, 'The Bible and the Significance of Civilization,' p. 357.

intrinsic to Christian difference, witness is an act that relativizes this difference in its very enactment. Of this Lehmann says,

> The surest mark of the 'unsaved' is that they are convinced that they are saved. Glorying in their salvation, they busy themselves presiding over the duties and the destiny of their 'unsaved' fellows. On the other hand, those who have learned from the Bible how salvation operates have other business to attend to. They are concerned neither to needle nor to negotiate individuals into conversion, knowing that conversion is a matter of election. Instead, they are preoccupied with the apostolic mission 'to make all see what is the place of the mystery hidden for ages in God' (Eph. 3:9-10).[104]

Lehmann's identification of the purposefulness of divine agency in the world with what he calls 'humanization' means that witness encompasses all the manifold ways the enactment of Christian difference serves to form and to sustain the *corpus humanum* in correspondence to the 'formative power of grace'.[105] To the degree that the Christian community in fact takes shape under the influence of *this* formative power, it exists as a 'church for others'. The Reformers called the human responsibility ingredient to Christian difference the 'priesthood of all believers,' by which was meant simply that,

> every believer was Christ to his neighbor. And to be Christ to one's neighbor is again, quite simply and succinctly, to be so identified with him in his humanity and one's own, as to be for him a living sign and occasion of what God in

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[104] Lehmann, 'Biblical View of Salvation,' p. 398.

[105] Lehmann, 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture,' I, 25.

> Christ is for–believer and neighbor alike, that is, the bearer of new and fulfilling life.[106]

The constructive human relation that occurs at the boundary of church and world is essential to the church's witness, indeed for Lehmann, it is a matter of particular urgency. A church that has 'got the Reformation' in this sense, knows that it is impossible in witness for the stress to fall upon 'the separation of the believer *from* the world *and* its sin rather than upon the identification of the believer *with* the world *in* its sin,' because the result of such active forgetting of the formative power *of grace* entails a double default, namely that 'the unbeliever is left alone in his dehumanization, and the believer undergoes a desiccation of his humanity'.[107]

It is by enacting Christian difference in the mode of responsible witness that the Christian community takes 'its inconspicuous but indispensable place in the providence of God and the confusion of men as the guardian and guarantee of authentic humanism'.[108] And, it does so with genuine expectation that in the formative power of divine particularity, the enactment of its own particularity—its experimental existence in the world—will clearly testify to the humanizing presence and purpose of the Word of God in the world. In the last analysis, therefore, the overriding tone of all Christian witness ought to be one of free and joyful confidence, reflecting the fact that in the midst of great perplexity and ambiguity 'the fear of misunderstanding is certainly no biblical criterion of the obedience of the Christian Church'.[109]

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[106] Lehmann, 'The Servant Image in Reformed Theology', p. 338.

[107] Lehmann, 'The Servant Image in Reformed Theology', pp. 349-50.

[108] Lehmann, 'The Servant Image in Reformed Theology', p. 351.

[109] Lehmann, 'The Christian Faith and Civil Liberties,' p. 7.

The second category with which Lehmann explains the public valence of Christian difference is that of *catalysis*. Again, as with 'witness' the idea of the Christian as catalyst is a logical implicate of the emphasis placed upon the priority and purpose of the agency of the Word of God in the world. It names another mode in which responsibility is assumed for Christian difference, the active effect of 'sharpening our imagination and nourishing our sensitivity about those frontiers of life where God is breaking in and through to make and to extend the territory of humanization.'[110] At the intersection of the Word of God and the world, the Christian community is made responsible 'not for the transmission of the power of holy things, but for the contagion of holy lives'.[111] Its own human activity, to the degree that it corresponds to divine agency, stands under the promise of serving as 'the leaven in the lump'.[112] To add a third metaphor, Lehmann observes how, 'political imagery is used in the Bible to proclaim and describe God as the architect of the humanity of man, to put Christian faith into the middle of the revolutionary environment of man, and to make Christian faith itself the catalyst of authentic revolution'.[113] As it testifies in world and deed to the humanizing *praxis* of God for the world, the Christian community inculcates humanistic ferment in the world. As Lehmann observes,

> the struggle for the integrity of responsible life *within* the household of faith is creatively and transformingly joined with the struggle for the integrity of responsible life *whenever* that struggle is being carried on in the world. This

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[110] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Shape of Theology for a World in Revolution', *Motive* 25:7 (1965), p. 13.

[111] Lehmann, 'Renewal in the Church', p. 475.

[112] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Evanston: Problems and Prospects,' *Theology Today* 11:2 (1954), p. 148.

[113] Lehmann, 'The Shape of Theology for a World in Revolution,' p. 12.

> creative and transforming bond between Christians and non-Christians in the struggle for the integrity of responsible life is the reality of reconciliation.[114]

Note well that the Christian corresponds most closely to the reality of the 'world of the Word of God' when she acts creatively in ways that befit the humanistic purpose of the Word of God itself, and that this occurs at the intersection of church and world. Put another way, Christian difference only has theological significance to the degree it is engaged for the sake of the humanity of non-Christians. As all this makes plain, witness and catalysis are not sharply distinguishable, as Lehmann observes,

> the political movement of God draws us into its own orbit of connecting fulfilment with decay and change with stability so that we are liberated to see our own true environment as a permanent revolution of mind and heart, and the Christian faith as the catalyst which lays bare Him who holds together the very fabric of human dying and living.[115]

In fact, the catalytic effect of the Christian community is in some ways a function of its making evident before the world its own thoroughgoing exposure to the searching criticism of the Word of God, and its reliance upon the formative power of grace. Thus, as Lehmann contends, precisely as the community set apart 'to be the steady catalyst and critic of its own life' in relation to the Word of God, the church serves as 'the catalyst and critic of every form of human

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[114] Paul L. Lehmann, 'An Inadmissible Default,' *The Christian Century* 81:2, no. 29 (1964), p. 908.

[115] Lehmann, 'The Shape of Theology for a World in Revolution,' p. 13.

community for the sake of the healing of the nations and the wholeness of the humanity of man'.[116]

Lehmann's description of Christian witness and action as 'catalytic' also means to signal a critical delimitation upon the work of the church in the world. A catalyst is not itself a primary reactant; it merely accelerates—and sometimes only serves to trace—something that is already occurring quite apart from its introduction into the mix. The metaphor is particularly apt. The tenor appropriate to the integrity of the identity of the Christian community, theologically understood, is a compound of humility, embarrassment and expectation. As the notions of witness and catalyst both intimate, when conceived within the framework of the concrete, dynamic and directed agency of the God of the gospel, Christian difference is rendered allergic to any and all claims to self-importance. The church exists, as Lehmann says on one occasion, as a community of those who are ever 'excluded in' and summoned to attest just this awkward fact about themselves. Such a body—a '*Gestalt* of grace' in Tillich's immensely useful phrase[117]—must understand itself in decidedly instrumental terms since,

> although the symbol of the communion of saints was in the first instance a way of pointing up the concrete location in the world at which the renewing and enabling power of grace was giving shape to human convictions and loyalties, there is no inherent and compulsive exclusiveness about it. On the contrary, the

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[116] Lehmann, 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture,' II, 25.

[117] Cf. the detailed discussion of this notion in Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, J. Luther (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 206f. Lehmann makes important use of the idea in his 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture'.

> communion of saints is in the world as the foretaste and catalyst of authentic community howsoever that community may be structured.[118]

As witness or catalyst, it is the ontic pressure of the reality of redemption that finally compels, capacitates and orients the Christian community in its responsible engagement in affairs of public import. The work of discernment and speaking the necessary and fitting word 'to the situation' is never the application of a technique of socio-political or socio-cultural casuistry on the part of the community of faith; and so it must do without the self-justification such a calculus might supply. It is, rather, an act of freely undertaken obedience that ever runs the risk of actual disobedience at every point. As Lehmann could state sharply as early as 1934, the church 'runs the risk of disobedience whatever step she takes. The Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. But if the Church does not speak at all, it could be that *this* is to commit that sin for which there is no forgiveness'.[119] Here, as ever in Lehmann's thought, it is the material centre of Christian difference—most pointedly the gracious self-giving of the divine as the gift of human justice beyond all self-righteousness—that presides over the identity and agency of the Christian community. Lehmann's thesis is this: that by attending to the substance of the Christian gospel the church finds its way into every human situation, because the reality to which the gospel attests is *already* engaged in every situation. The upshot of this is to recognize that,

> the concern for relevance on its own terms is misleading; it is what always makes Christians fall flat on their faces–because they are out of character. They are not supposed to be relevant; they supposed to be Christian, which is to *be*

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[118] Lehmann, 'The Reformation and the Re-Making of Culture,' I, 34.

[119] Lehmann, 'A Decision Confronts the Church,' p. 14.

> involved in the very center of the dynamics of revolution. . . . Christians should have known about revolution all along.[120]

IV/ Conclusion

. . .we can scarcely have failed to make it plain that somehow we are wrestling together with and about this messianic difference.[121]

In 1961 Lehmann contributed a short commentary to *Religion in Life* in which he reflected from thirty years' distance upon the nature and significance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's sojourns to America. Making specific reference to Bonhoeffer's 'Protestantism without Reformation,' Lehmann writes:

> In putting his finger upon the theological vacuum in America and upon the alienation of American Protestantism from its originating impulse, Bonhoeffer exposed the nerve center of the theological situation in this country as he actually encountered it. Perhaps the best proof of the accuracy of his negative appraisal of what he found is that during the decades since his report the theological and ecumenical awareness of American Protestantism has been developing in the direction of his keen evaluation and prognosis.[122]

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[120] Lehmann, 'The Shape of Theology for a World in Revolution,' p. 9.

[121] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Then What Did You Go Out to See?' *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 25:3 (1961), p. 12.

[122] Paul L. Lehmann, 'Commentary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in America,' *Religion in Life* 30: 4 (1961), p. 618.

Undoubtedly, Lehmann contributed to the developing awareness to which he refers; as we have shown, his own theological endeavours during these same decades were committed to pursuit of the therapy called for by Bonhoeffer's evaluation and prognosis.

In a letter written several years after his retirement, Lehmann responds to an inquiry from a graduate student concerned that his theological account of the relation of church and world fails sufficiently to cement the connection between the two. To this he replies:

> As you rightly remark, 'there must somehow be a firmer link between those in and outside the *koinonia'*. There is indeed! But the link is supplied neither by reason nor by law but by the fact that God is at work in the world which He has created and redeemed, and in Jesus Christ, God has disclosed that He has his own way of dealing with those who believe and those who don't.[123]

This essay has attempted to display the manner in which Lehmann sought, during the first three decades of his theological career, to explicate the nature and consequences of precisely this 'link' between the Christian community and the world for which it lives. Beginning with his extended engagement with the theology of Karl Barth, through repeated considerations of the 'context' established by the concreteness, dynamics and direction of divine agency, Lehmann is concerned to articulate the significance of the material determinants of Christian difference for understanding the identity and agency of the church in the world.

A common feature of many programmes of contemporary public theology is a tendency to raise and programmatically to answer key questions of method and principle at some remove from direct interaction with the material constituents of the Christian doctrinal tradition. Lehmann offers a quite different approach. It is one in which important material elements of the

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[123] Paul L. Lehmann to Tina Pippin, 14 September 1979. *PLL Papers*, box 55, file 27.

Christian doctrinal tradition are marshalled by theological exposition in order to frame the asking and answering of such questions of method and principle in significant, possibly compelling, and perhaps also surprising ways. If Lehmann's work sits uneasily with such contemporary proposals for public theology, the source of this unease is likely Lehmann's commitment to describing the identity of the Christian community, the nature of its relation to the world, and the nature of the theological task itself in concretely dogmatic terms.[124] But perhaps it is just this—or something akin to it—which is most needed at the present juncture. In order to get beyond the attenuated moral and religious vocabularies and the foreshortening of vision which seem to afflict a great deal of the public engagement of mainline Protestant communities, Charles Matthewes has suggested that,

> We need a better and more sophisticated theology—one that can retain the energies of these moral languages without allowing those energies to be trapped in the dead ends of indifference or judgmentalism as they are today. . . . We have lost any sense of God as an agent confronting us in the world and in history, and with that loss we have lost one of the most powerful mobilizing forces for religious activity. . . . We need an enlivening vision of a repersonalized God, a vision that enables us to imagine a 'living God' as Barth and Jonathan Edwards

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[124] John Webster writes that 'the most startling feature' of theology done beyond liberalism '(as well as the feature which its critics find most puzzling) is its invocation of theological categories in describing the nature of theology, in narrating its history and in outlining its contemporary responsibilities.'— 'Theology After Liberalism?' in *Theology After Liberalism*, ed. J. Webster and G.P. Schner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 60.

> suggested, a vision that encourages us to remain always open to God speaking a new word to the world and in our hearts.[125]

Lehmann's name should be added to the list of those to whom one can turn to find precisely such a vision. For, the wager of Lehmann's theology is that the public significance and responsibility of the Christian community will be clarified, invigorated and made more viable when theology commits itself to the service of the church's endeavour 'in word and deed to make Jesus Christ plain and persuasive in the world.'[126] This it does by practicing that 'strange concentration upon Christ,' in which the concreteness, dynamic and direction of God's activity is understood to engender a Christian difference whose worldly fruits are self-effacing witness and catalytic action in the service of the *corpus humanum*.

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[125] Charles T. Matthewes, 'Reconsidering the Role of Mainline Churches in Public Life' *Theology Today* 58:4 (2002), pp. 564-565.

[126] Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Missionary Obligation of the Church,' *Theology Today* 9:1 (1952), p. 20. Lehmann was the chair of a commission of seventeen persons who prepared this text—the North American report on Aim I of the Study of the Missionary Obligation of the Church—for the International Missionary Council.

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ABSTRACT

Paul L. Lehmann (1906-1994) was a leading Protestant theologian and ethicist in his generation. Working directly with archival sources and early writings, this essay offers and account of the formation of key features of his distinctive theological perspective up during the first decades of his professional career. It argues that Lehmann prosecutes a distinctive and markedly Protestant form of public theology, centred on an understanding of the Word of God as a present, dynamic and humanising power, to which Christian faith, life and thought gives witness and serves catalytically. In this, Lehmann shows himself to be a premier advocate for lines of thinking he first encountered in the work of Karl Barth and of his friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

KEYWORDS

Paul L. Lehmann

Karl Barth

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Public Theology

Christology and Ethics

Witness

Context