

## INVESTING IN THE RUINS: JEREMIAH AND THEOLOGICAL VOCATION

PAUL HOUSE\*

### INTRODUCTION

I am honored to present the presidential address for the 2012 ETS annual meeting. This has been a stimulating and challenging assignment for several reasons. For one thing, persons who come to this meeting are engaged in a wide range of theological vocations. Our society brings together faculty and students from various disciplines, as well as pastors, missionaries, publishers, administrators, and family members.

Furthermore, the people who attend this meeting represent many theological traditions. We come from Reformed, Lutheran, Catholic, Wesleyan, Baptist, Stone-Campbell, Pentecostal, Adventist, Anglican, and other circles and networks.

Also, attendees hail from many places. The majority comes from North America, which is a pretty diverse continent. We also have members attending this year from Europe, Africa, South America, Asia, and Australia. This is wonderful, though not completely surprising, since about 400 of our 4000 members live outside North America.

Finally, the people that attend the ETS annual meeting come with varied joys and concerns. I have attended this event every year since 1987, so I have now spent about three months of my life at ETS national meetings, which is a sobering thought! Some of those years I carried terrible personal or professional burdens. Other years were the opposite.

Why have I returned year after year? The reason is that regardless of my personal circumstances, I have always found sustaining fellowship here, where I encounter a diverse group of colleagues who practice their theological vocations in the evangelical intellectual and spiritual tradition of confessing the perfection of God and his word. I have come to believe that this theological vocational fellowship is essential to ETS and must remain so. Thus, tonight I will talk about preserving our vocations. To this end I will share some thoughts about our affections: the persons, places, and ideas we love and serve. These motivate our theological vocations. I will then discuss friendships that sustain us in our vocations. I will use the book of Jeremiah as the basis for my comments.

In this way I hope to address our conference theme of “Caring for Creation,” albeit from a different angle of vision. *Caring* for creation begins when reverence

---

\* Paul House, professor of Divinity (OT) at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35229, delivered this presidential address at the 64th annual meeting of the ETS on November 15, 2012, in Milwaukee, WI.

for God and obedience to his word lead to affection for conversion, character, community, friendship, stewardship, service, good work in good places, and concern for others, particularly those in future generations. Our theological vocations also flow from these same pure waters. *Mistreatment* of creation stems from many things, but it certainly begins with wrong affections sustained by harmful friendships. Mistreatment of creation begins when money, careers, prestige, political expediency, and power are cherished chief affections. As the naturalist John Muir once wrote, “Nothing dollarable is safe, however guarded.”<sup>1</sup> Corruption of our vocations also begins with these bad affections. Our theological vocations can be polluted to the extent that they consciously or unconsciously adopt the philosophy of death that threatens creation. Happily, we are not helpless captives of unbiblical affections and methods. God provides guidance, hope, and courage for our shared journey.

### I. JEREMIAH AND THEOLOGICAL VOCATIONS

It is crucial to explore theological vocations biblically and theologically. I believe in the unity of the Bible and thus in the practice of whole-Bible Biblical Theology.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I would enjoy tracing this theme of theological vocation throughout the Scriptures. But time is rightly limited, and OT is my primary field. Over the past thirty years I have found Jeremiah a rich resource for understanding my own theological vocation, so I will use this magnificent book as the basis for the rest of this address.

In Jeremiah readers encounter marvelous historical characters whose lives provide insight into our shared work. These include Jeremiah, Baruch, and Ebed-melech, flawed and yet beautiful people who serve Yahweh and others in deteriorating times. I believe their witness instructs ETS members in at least two crucial ways.

First, Jeremiah and Baruch embraced theological affections that sustained them during a lifetime of difficult service. This service lasted from their early attempts to reform Judah’s faith to their later years spent as refugee theologians in a polytheistic land.

Second, Jeremiah, Baruch, and Ebed-melech embraced courageous friendship. These other person-centered<sup>3</sup> servants were loyal to one another because they were loyal to God. They encouraged and corrected one another, and together they invested in the ruins of Judah. Their example calls us to faithfulness to the Triune God and to one another, regardless of the times.

---

<sup>1</sup> He made this statement in a memorandum to the Sierra Club on May 14, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> See Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> This phrase comes from the work of the Australian theologian D. B. Knox. For an introduction to his work, see his *The Everlasting God* (1979; repr. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2009).

## II. AFFECTIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL VOCATION: JEREMIAH 1:1–19

Like all human beings, Jeremiah's affections shaped his life. Writers as diverse in time and interests as Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and Wendell Berry (b. 1934) have discussed the importance of our affections. In his 1746 work *Religious Affections*, Edwards sought to describe true and false conversion by examining twelve signs of genuine piety.<sup>4</sup> Colonial America scholar Richard Bailey explains that for Edwards the term “affections” meant “vigorous and sensible exercises of the heart.”<sup>5</sup> Edwards thought quite rightly that affections inevitably reveal themselves through actions.

For fifty years Wendell Berry has emphasized the importance of demonstrating affection for people and places. He defines “affection” in the following comments about Hayden Carruth's poetry:

I think that Hayden's idea of a livable life is a life that has affections in it—a life to give it the fullest scope of his art, in which the things you love are properly praised and properly mourned.... If you know his work, you know you can find dislike in it, and anger too. Even so, he is a poet of affection. If he dislikes, that is because he likes. If he is angry, that is because of damage to what he loves. His affection is capacious and generous; everything worthy is at home in it. As he knows, everything worthy is fragile and under threat, is prey to time and invisible to power, and yet affection keeps the accounting in the black. Worthy things, invested with affection, pass into the “now/which is eternal.”<sup>6</sup>

Recently Berry has asserted that this love for people, places, and local cultures is essential for environmental and societal renewal.<sup>7</sup>

Jeremiah also believed that love motivates action. So he sought to change hearts (4:1–4; 17:1–10) through an enduring relationship (31:35–40) with an unchanging God (10:10). He desired a renewed people in a renewed land (31:31–40). He pursued these goals in partnership with friends, in very tough conditions.

Jeremiah 1:1 opens the book by stating that what follows are the “words of Jeremiah.” He was a priest from Anathoth, a village four miles northeast of Jerusalem associated with the old banished priestly line of Abiathar.<sup>8</sup> God had commanded Israelite priests to teach God's people God's word.<sup>9</sup> This charge could only be kept properly by careful, deep, and life-long learning. The book demonstrates that Jeremiah kept this charge to learn. It shows he clearly studied and loved Moses'

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith, 1746; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> Bailey gave me this definition in a personal conversation on July 5, 2012 in Holland, MI. For Bailey's work on Edwards in particular and Colonial American life and religion in general, see *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (Religion in America; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills, eds., *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010) 62.

<sup>7</sup> See Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Sam 22:11–23; 2 Sam 15:24–29; 1 Kgs 1:7–8; 2:26.

<sup>9</sup> See Deut 33:8–11; Mal 2:1–9; Ezra 7:10; 2 Chr 17:7–9.

writings, especially Deuteronomy.<sup>10</sup> It shows that previous prophets, especially Hosea, influenced him (cf. Hosea 1–3 and Jeremiah 2–6). It reveals that he knew the Ten Commandments (7:1–8:3) and that he taught about creation (10:1–16); sin and repentance (17:1–10); obedience to God’s covenant standards (2:1–3:5); present and future judgment; the Messiah (23:1–8); and God’s sovereignty over all nations (Jeremiah 46–51). In short, he was a true teaching priest, in contrast to the worthless priests he and Hosea denounce.<sup>11</sup> As a true teaching priest he presented God’s word in creative, thoughtful ways.

Verses 2–3 add that the book does not just consist of Jeremiah’s words. What follows is *God’s* word given through Jeremiah during a specific historical period. Though hardly without opposition, a fair range of scholars argue the book offers reliable portraits of Jeremiah and his times.<sup>12</sup> His ministry spans thirteen years of Josiah’s reforming reign (c. 622–609 BC), twenty-two years of declining political and spiritual fortunes (609–587 BC), and Jerusalem’s fall (587 BC).

These verses alert us to the fact that Jeremiah could not stop Judah’s slide towards spiritual and national ruin. They also remind us Jeremiah did not choose his times, nor do we. We can only carry out our theological vocation in the times God gives us. *God* rules persons and history. God may grant us some measure of the renewal we desire. Regardless, he will ask for sacrifice that shows his “strength in weakness,” as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 12:8. After all, as Scott Hafemann writes, “Suffering strips away second-rate sources of happiness, even divinely granted spiritual experiences and revelations, driving us to depend on God alone to satisfy the deepest longings of our heart.”<sup>13</sup> How the present and future unfold is God’s business. Our task is to do good work in the times he gives.

Next, Jer 1:4–12 describes Jeremiah’s job and job description. His job is challenging, to say the least. He is to be a prophet to the nations. He is to be God’s ambassador to God’s hostile, rebellious subjects in many lands. Jeremiah’s job description is equally challenging. He must profess God’s word as God directs. He must declare people’s sins, their certain judgment if they do not repent, and God’s saving grace. In short, he must share with nations caught up in the whirlwind of ancient politics the profound reality the apostle Paul calls “the gospel of God” in Rom 1:1. He feels inadequate for the job (1:6), but this does not matter. His adequacy comes from God, who shaped him in his mother’s womb (1:4–5).

Jeremiah 1:13–19 completes the commissioning. God tells Jeremiah what we already know: his ministry will not save the nation. Judah will fall due to love of

<sup>10</sup> For a survey of Jeremiah’s biblical influences, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Old Testament Theology; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 10–27.

<sup>11</sup> See Jer 23:9–40 and Hos 4:1–19.

<sup>12</sup> These writers include the following: J. A. Thompson, *Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); *idem*, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); and Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20* (AB 21A; New York: Doubleday, 1999) 102–20.

<sup>13</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 477.

idols (1:13–16). God also informs Jeremiah that the people, priests, prophets, and officials will oppose him (1:17–19) as they have opposed God. They will not overcome him, however, for God promises his presence and deliverance. God will give him his life as a reward and as a sign of God’s faithfulness.

God’s promises come true as the book proceeds. People plot against Jeremiah, speak against him, jail him, starve him, and leave him wallowing in a muddy cistern. Finally, they take him to Egypt, where he presumably dies outside the land he labored to preserve. But they do not silence or kill him. God did not lie to him, though one is struck by the severity of this truthfulness.

I think Jeremiah 1 offers persons pursuing theological vocations five foundational affections. First, the passage stresses God must be our chief affection. God alone saves, calls, equips, and delivers. God alone gives the humility and courage needed to serve him. God gives these by teaching us complete dependence on him as we believe and obey him. Humility and courage do not come from tenure, publishing, or speaking engagements. Those who lack humility and courage before tenure or fame often lack it afterwards, sometimes in greater measure. We must get humility and courage from God. He alone sustains us through his unfailing, faithful, and promise-keeping presence.

Second, the passage indicates that trust in God’s word is an indispensable affection in theological vocation. Those who love and trust God also love and trust his word. As Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann have observed in comments on Deut 6:4–9, “The love of God and the love of God’s commandments are identical. Those who love reconfigure their lives to the light of God’s law.”<sup>14</sup>

This love and trust is necessary in part because ministry based on God’s word is perennially under threat on many fronts. Since this is true, we need all of you. We need biblical theologians to explain individual passages and connect them to the whole word of God, thereby setting all theological analysis on firm foundations. We need philosophers to explain the epistemological bases of understanding God and his word, as Greg Thornbury’s forthcoming book on Carl Henry so ably argues. We need systematic theologians to produce clear, unified, and applicatory works. We need historians to connect us to our brothers and sisters in Christ, living and dead. We need ethicists to teach us to reflect God’s compassion, mercy, and justice (Exod 34:6–7). We need courageous leaders and generous donors to give structural and financial support for what most of us love to do: provide biblical, personal, face-to-face, incarnational, character forming, mind building, and community building ministry.<sup>15</sup> We need publishers who produce strong theological works of vari-

<sup>14</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011) 100.

<sup>15</sup> I do not believe that such ministry can occur by offering online college or seminary classes, sending video sermons to satellite church campuses, or by writing books, blogs, and tweets for people we have never met. One can argue that such types of dispensing information offer *communication*, but they do not offer *communion*, which I believe is intrinsic to all human teaching and is explicitly intrinsic to Christian teaching (see Deut 6:4–9; Matt 28:16–20; 2 John 12; etc.). For the difference between commu-

ous types, and we need to support them financially. Above all, we need pastors and parents to teach and model the Scriptures cross-culturally and cross-generationally. We need everyone in the field, for we have labored long and much remains to be done. This is all good work that flows from humble and courageous commitment to God's sufficient word.

Third, this passage emphasizes affection for the gospel and for people. Since we love people, even our enemies, we teach God's message.<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah's great themes of creation, covenant, sin, judgment, messiah, service, and ultimate renewal must remain the heart of our message. These seemingly simple themes are actually the deep things of God. They cannot be learned well without serious study. Thus, research that illuminates even small portions of this gospel matters. Our research *can* be too esoteric, yet years of study and writing on a seemingly small matter can make a great difference in future generations. We need never be ashamed of God's call to extensive, time-consuming study. Likewise, we must never be ashamed of God's call to more general assignments. Love demands both.

Fourth, the passage indicates that affection for faithfulness to God is the truest mark of success. Jeremiah refutes the common notion that numbers and influence equal success.<sup>17</sup> By these standards Jeremiah was a failure, and so was Jesus. Numbers do not tell the whole story. God's character includes unshakeable faithfulness that cannot be seen and measured. When our faithfulness mirrors his, the same is true. This means small seminaries and churches may be as faithful as large ones, and vice versa. It also cautions against desiring numbers so much we treat other believers as competitors instead of as brothers and sisters in Christ. The world may think like this; we must not.

Fifth, the passage stresses affection for the creative use of minds, wills, and imaginations in God's service. Jeremiah read widely and thought deeply. As God's Spirit carried him along (see 2 Pet 1:16–21), God's written word shaped his ministry and his imagination. Thus, he was not afraid to be himself when he presented God's words. He was not even afraid to express anger at God or be corrected by God.<sup>18</sup> He had an open, honest, and obedient relationship with God. His mind therefore developed as he faithfully pursued his vocation.

### III. FRIENDSHIP AND THEOLOGICAL VOCATION: JEREMIAH AND BARUCH

Shared affections lead to friendships. Once again, Jonathan Edwards and Wendell Berry provide some perspective. Richard Bailey notes the long-term friendship between Jonathan Edwards and Edward Billing, for whom Edwards preached two installation sermons. Billing risked his reputation by supporting Ed-

nication and communion in an advertising-driven culture, see Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999) 3–16.

<sup>16</sup> See Matt 5:43–48.

<sup>17</sup> On this subject see R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> See Jeremiah 11–20 on this point.

wards when Edwards was fired from his church.<sup>19</sup> Wendell Berry has written extensively about long-term friendship in several fine essays.<sup>20</sup> His fiction and poems also illustrate the power of friendship practiced over many years.<sup>21</sup> The Scriptures teach that human beings are made for community, for they are made in God's image. Paul and John stress their strong preference for face-to-face fellowship over written communication<sup>22</sup> in their epistles. Jürgen Moltmann observes, "The community of Christ is a community in the friendship of Jesus. The person who lives in his friendship also discovers Jesus' friends his brothers and sisters, the people he calls blessed."<sup>23</sup>

Jeremiah's commissioning clearly indicates he would not be popular.<sup>24</sup> His early ministry was often lonely (see 11:18–12:6). But he did not revel in his rectitude or solitude. He loved the people and the land. He prayed for his enemies until God stopped him (15:1–2). He grieved that he had to be so contrary to others (20:7–18).

Eventually he was not alone. Chapters 32–45 introduce the scribe Baruch, Jeremiah's closest associate. From 605 BC until after 587 BC these men were partners in calling, affections, and service. Their long association lessened their burdens and presents a compelling case for the necessity of friendship in theological vocation.

The book does not reveal how the two met or why they agreed to work together. But there was nothing unusual about their association. Scribes had been working with prophets for centuries in other lands and probably in Judah and Israel as well. John Hilber argues persuasively that ancient scribes were careful to convey accurately what prophets said.<sup>25</sup> Honest scribes did not feel free to change the message. Jeremiah 8:8 reflects this concern for accuracy, for it criticizes "the lying pen of the scribes" that alters God's word, and makes it "into a lie."

In 605 BC Jeremiah had Baruch write his earlier messages on a scroll. Jeremiah 36 notes that Jeremiah had been banned from the temple for his stringent preaching. So he ordered Baruch to stand in for him "on a day of fasting in the hearing of all the people in the Lord's house" (36:6). Jeremiah hoped the scroll's words would spark repentance (36:7). Some months later (36:9), temple leaders and local officials heard Baruch read the scroll (36:11–15). They confirmed that Baruch worked with Jeremiah (36:16–18), then kindly advised Baruch and Jeremiah to hide (36:19). James Muilenburg argues that the audience's protective reaction likely

<sup>19</sup> Bailey and Wills, *Salvation of Souls*, 155–56.

<sup>20</sup> See *Imagination in Place*, 39–48; 55–72; 83–86; 87–101; and 111–14; and *It All Turns on Affection*, 93–101; 111–25.

<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (San Francisco: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004) 38–76, 266–88, and 319–36.

<sup>22</sup> See 1 Thess 3:10; 2 Tim 1:4, 4:9; and 2 John 12.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 89.

<sup>24</sup> The symbolic acts God assigns him in 16:1–13 highlight this potential loneliness.

<sup>25</sup> See John Hilber, "The Culture of Prophecy and Writing in the Ancient Near East," in James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, eds., *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 219–41.

shows that Baruch had a high reputation.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, the two men were now inextricably linked to the scroll, its contents, and to one another.

The scroll's next audience included King Jehoiakim, one of the shiftest political operators in Israelite history. Unlike the earlier hearers, the scroll does not disturb Jehoiakim in the least. He burns it. Jeremiah and Baruch's efforts seem to have been for nothing.

Two significant things happen next. First, Jeremiah and Baruch rewrite the scroll, adding many similar words to it (36:32). Some scholars think this noting of additions indicates Jeremiah and most other prophetic books were edited and expanded for years after the prophets died. In context, however, the statement is a specific recollection of defiance, courage, faithfulness, and theologically driven friendship, not a clue about redaction processes.

Second, Baruch receives a personal message from God recorded in 45:1–5. God notes Baruch's groaning over his circumstances (45:1–3). He informs Baruch he is tearing down centuries of work done for his people (45:4). God then says, "And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not."<sup>27</sup> Baruch then receives the same reward offered Jeremiah: God's presence and God's protection (45:5). Baruch learns ministry is not about prestige. Baruch's association with Jeremiah may be bad for his career, but it is good for his relationship with God.

Baruch and Jeremiah persevere for twenty more years. At a crucial point they get help from a Cushite named Ebed-melech. This man rescues Jeremiah from imprisonment in a muddy cistern, bravely confronting King Zedekiah on Jeremiah's behalf. For his faithfulness God provides Ebed-melech the same promises of life and divine presence given Jeremiah and Baruch (39:15–18).

After Jerusalem falls, some men kill Babylon's appointed governor (41:1–3). Fearing Babylon's wrath, the people ask Jeremiah if they should flee to Egypt or stay in Jerusalem (42:1–6). When Jeremiah counsels the latter (42:7–22), the people deny this is God's word. They blame Jeremiah's so-called faulty oracle on Baruch's malignant influence (43:3). The people then take the two friends to Egypt (43:4–7), where they probably died, bereft of the comfort of familiar territory.

But prior to departing to Egypt the two had made an odd purchase. As the Babylonian army besieges Jerusalem, Jeremiah languishes in prison (32:1–5). God tells Jeremiah that he will have the opportunity to buy land outside the city and that he must do so (32:6–8). God tells Jeremiah to invest in the ruins of Judah.

Jeremiah buys the land; Baruch documents the transaction (32:9–14). Quite understandably, Jeremiah asks God why this purchase was necessary (32:16–25). God answers that Jerusalem will be rebuilt, David's lineage will rule again, and all

<sup>26</sup> James Muilenburg, "Baruch the Scribe," in John I. Durham and J. R. Porter, eds., *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies* (Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 228.

<sup>27</sup> As I noted above, some scholars find 36:32 a clue to long-term ongoing redaction of the book. They also think 36:32 and the general emphasis on Baruch in chapters 32–45 reflects the growing importance of scribal viewpoints in Israelite religion. These assertions do not take 45:1–5 sufficiently into account. Here Baruch receives a very lowly role, which counteracts the notion of the book of Jeremiah reflecting and supporting growing scribal influence. Even if I am wrong on this point, if scribes grasped power, they did not read 45:1–5 carefully.

the promises of the new covenant outlined in chapter 31 will be fulfilled (32:16–33:26). God will create a new kingdom out of the ruins of the old. As it turns out, Jeremiah has gotten a priceless deal. He has purchased property in the kingdom of God; and his friend Baruch holds the deed.

It would be nice if the book ended with Baruch returning to this spot to put his late friend Jeremiah's life and words in proper order. This was not to be. Many diligent scholarly works have understandably sought to explain the book of Jeremiah's seemingly scrambled order and stages of composition. Sometimes a simple answer is best. Perhaps Jeremiah reads like the work of refugees pressed by circumstances because that is precisely what it is. The book's unsettled contents may mirror Baruch and Jeremiah's unsettled lives.

We could wish for something neater. Or, we could thank God that for every faithful Christian theologian ever imprisoned, displaced, hounded, and exiled, for every writer ever forced by persecution and deprivation to leave an untidy work, there is a book that reflects and honors their service. We could thank God that we see Jeremiah and Baruch's friendship in the life of people like Eberhard Bethge, who collected his friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer's scattered papers and letters and made them available to the world.<sup>28</sup> We could thank God for hope that comes from knowing current friendships will continue forever in God's kingdom. We could rejoice in knowing the God who rebuilds the ruins of this world.

What are the characteristics of this friendship we can model today? First, we can regularly make common cause with like-minded servants of God, such as those we see around us tonight. We can work together diligently using our individual gifts.

Second, we can sharpen one another's thinking and serving and thus help one another do good work. Jeremiah spoke God's word to Baruch concerning his selfish attitude in 45:1–5. Perhaps members of ETS can do a better job of helping one another improve our research, writing, and teaching. Perhaps we can even learn to do so without first posting our criticisms on the worldwide web.

Third, we can stand with our friends even when doing so risks our reputations. Jeremiah and Baruch never sold out a friend for political, institutional, or professional gain. Sadly, this is partly what makes their friendship so rare.

Fourth, we can invest in the ruins together. God does not promise us that biblical Christianity will win the day, if winning the day means evangelicals possessing prestige, power, and influence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer ended his teaching career instructing eight people in a rural farmhouse,<sup>29</sup> faithfully investing in the ruins. Investing in the ruins testifies that God reigns. The outcome of our labors is not in doubt. As co-heirs with Jesus the Christ we have a place in the choicest territory.

<sup>28</sup> On Bethge's friendship with Bonhoeffer and his stewardship of Bonhoeffer's papers, see John W. de Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Spirit: Bonhoeffer's Friend Eberhard Bethge* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); and Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1995), esp. 80–104.

<sup>29</sup> See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (rev. ed.; trans. Eric Mosbacher et al.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) 666–68; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940* (ed. Victoria J. Barnett; trans. Victoria J. Barnett et al.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works, Volume 15; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 291–303, 594.

I conclude this section by speaking quite candidly and gratefully. I could not have made it this far without Christian friends. In particular, at a crucial time in my life certain friends mediated Christ's delivering strength to me. Some are here tonight;<sup>30</sup> others could not be here but wanted to be;<sup>31</sup> others had better things to do;<sup>32</sup> others are scattered abroad; still others have crossed over to safety<sup>33</sup> with God. Not all my friends agree with me theologically or denominationally. Not all can or need to join ETS. But because we share faith in Christ I will enjoy their company forever. I counsel all of you, especially younger friends getting started, not to put the great things you seek for yourself before affection for God and his servants. Rather, emulate Jeremiah and Baruch's courageous and godly friendship. Your life will be richer for it.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I suspect these fundamental truths from Jeremiah will always be opposed. I think they will be increasingly so for some time, especially in evangelical circles, for we have drunk deeply at the polluted wells of numbers, competition, industrial education, political salvation, and trivial marketing of life and death matters. So we must strengthen our affections and friendships.

Basing our work on God and his word rather than on secular models of production and consumption is rarely popular. Yet this is essential. Proclaiming that the gospel holds the remedy for sin and its effects on people, the earth, and education seems simple-minded to many. Yet the gospel provides endless intellectual engagement for those who practice what Kelly Kopic calls "faithful reasoning"<sup>34</sup> and Win Corduan calls "reasonable faith."<sup>35</sup> Obedience to Christ often lands one in trouble. So does creative thinking, even creative thinking anchored fully in inerrancy. Yet creative faithful inquiry remains essential for orthodox theological integrity. Treating other churches and institutions as partners instead of competitors despite our current cutthroat environment of franchising churches and academic institutions could reduce your numbers. But it could also make you look like Jesus, Paul, and Peter. Investing in ruins is hardly the spirit of any age, but it is the spirit of the kingdom that never ends.

---

<sup>30</sup> I am particularly grateful that Kyle McClellan, Richard A. Bailey, Greg Thornbury, and Scott Hafemann made special arrangements to attend. I was also very happy to see many Taylor University colleagues who supported me in those days attend this year's national meeting.

<sup>31</sup> I think particularly of my friend C. Ben Mitchell, who was with me when I faced my life's greatest disappointment, who could not attend due to physical issues.

<sup>32</sup> I have in mind here my friends Jim Dixon, who has given me wise advice for thirty years, who did not attend due to being on a much-deserved vacation cruise, and Tom Jones who was too busy at his post as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Taylor University to attend the meeting.

<sup>33</sup> I have taken this phrasing from Wallace Stegner's excellent novel on friendship. See Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (1987; repr. New York: Modern Library, 2002). I particularly have in mind Robert Pitts (1932–2004).

<sup>34</sup> See Kelly Kopic, *A Little Book for New Theologians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012) 49–63.

<sup>35</sup> Win Corduan, *Reasonable Faith: Basic Christian Apologetics* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

Please take heart. So many of you are clearly committed to the right things. Thus, never doubt that you practice the best intellectual and spiritual arts. As Carl Henry, a fine encourager, might put it, your character displays the beauty of God, his revelation, and his authority.<sup>36</sup> You help remake modern and postmodern minds.<sup>37</sup> You are freed from the uneasy conscience of modern and postmodern fundamentalism.<sup>38</sup> You provide an evangelical demonstration of love for God and neighbor.<sup>39</sup> In short, you please God, who judges the quality of our affections by our faithfulness.<sup>40</sup> Like Jeremiah and Baruch, you testify that this is ultimately all that matters.

---

<sup>36</sup> See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: Six Volumes* (1976–1983; repr. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946).

<sup>38</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

<sup>39</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *A Plea for an Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971).

<sup>40</sup> See Berry, *Imagination in Place* 63.