Preface to the Second Edition

A great deal has happened since the publication of this book in 1982. In this revision its basic argument remains the same. I judge that its essential contention not only remains viable, but is even more pertinent and urgent than when first published.

In Old Testament study, I had argued for pedagogical attention to the shape of the canon in the Hebrew Bible. Since that time, canonical study of scripture has become even more important. The work of Brevard Childs, Ronald Clements, Rolf Rendtorff, and James Sanders has helped us move beyond historical-critical questions to the theological intentionality of the text. Historical-critical work continues to be important, but it is not an end in itself. It is plausible to suggest that the church has invested too much of its energy in historical questions. We are now able, in critical scripture, to speak more directly and confessionally about the theological nature and intentionality of the text that was shaped for and by the confessing communities of Judaism and Christianity. To be sure, historical questions are still being asked, but one has the impression that they no longer serve us very well, and mostly continue to be asked either by those who want to accommodate the Bible to Enlightenment rationality or by those who want vigorously to resist Enlightenment rationality by pulling the wagons into a circle. The work of the
confessing community that shaped the canonical scripture did so for quite other reasons, and it is those reasons that are front and center in canonical study and in current pedagogy in confessional communities. While the threefold structure of the canon of the Hebrew Bible is settled, James Sanders has helped us by insisting on the flexible openness of the canon as a normative script that continues to evoke fresh and imaginative interpretation. That fresh evocation is behind a pedagogical consideration of the scripture as canon. Such a notion of canon yields a norming process that is in endless engagement with new contexts that evoke and require fresh formulation, exactly the work of education.

On the side of Christian education, I have no doubt that the argument made here is of immense importance. I have suggested a very rough correlation between the sequence of three canons in the Hebrew Bible and the maturation process of the narrative wonder of childhood, the oracular contrariness of adolescence, and the capacity for wisdom in the aging process. Such a correlation has no more than heuristic value. We have, however, learned enough about the biological substructure of learning capacities to know that maturation in faith is in part limited and made possible by maturation in biological processes and capacities. We learn when we are able to learn and not before. Thus some elements of faith education are particularly appropriate to moments in one’s maturation process. I believe this is a useful key to canonical education, so that the norming script has a word to speak wherever we are in our own exercise of maturity.

We have learned from the taxonomy of George Lindbeck about the cruciality of forming and maintaining a “cultural-linguistic community” that has staying power not only in what it claims to say but in how it makes that claim. The canonical norming process provides the materials out of which such a cultural-linguistic
community may be formed, and surely the process of Church education is exactly to form such a community with a distinct identity and missional imperative. When we allow the notion of “canonical” to be linked to the notion of “covenantal” (most broadly construed), we begin to see that the center of this norming tradition is the capacity to take seriously the reality of the other in the life of the community. We have learned from the trajectory of Martin Buber and his “I-Thou” (by way of Emmanuel Levinas) that the other is definitional to the practice of faith. Thus “love of God” and “love of neighbor” are not options but constitute the defining materials of this tradition. It is inescapable, in making such claims, that the process of serious sustained socialization, nurture, and education should be deeply and practically dialogical, making reference to “the other” (“the wholly other”) central to the work. Church educators have always known this. But the canonical process makes clear not only that the dialogue is important but makes equally clear what the dialogue is about.

This way of articulating the scriptural, the biological, and the social as a dialogical enterprise is crucial to the task of canonical-covenantal education. It is now clear that the dominant ideology of our culture (that I have elsewhere termed “military consumerism”) is a map of social death in its adamant refusal of the dialogical. The inventory of social pathologies is obvious to us—concerning the economy, the environment, and the social infrastructure—making clear that our society is mindlessly committed to self-destruction. It is clear that this ideology, mostly uncriticized among us, cannot and does not make us either safe or happy. This suggests that canonical-covenantal education in a dialogical mode has as its task nothing less than the evocation of an alternative world of neighborliness, and the nurturing of persons to live in, participate, and contribute to that alternative world. Such a practice of education is inherently
subversive, reflective of the inherent subversiveness of canonical testimony.

In our context of military consumerism, to which so much of Christianity has signed on with ready accommodation, it is no wonder that the percentage of “nones,” those who subscribe to no faith, has grown exponentially. It is likewise no wonder that many have taken refuge in the mantra of “spiritual but not religious” that means to avoid all claims of tradition and community. It is no wonder indeed. In the midst of faith that is hugely misunderstood and misrepresented and therefore rejected, making fresh sense out of the canonical tradition is an urgent task. It is our bet that such fresh sense from old texts will have great appeal to many who have thought they had no such option. The “force of empire” that depends on an expansive military, that summons always to buy and consume, that proposes endless technical fixes to human issues, leaves folk exhausted with “heavy burdens” of production and consumption (Matt. 11:28–30). In a yearning for a “light burden and an easy yoke,” the offer of this canonical-covenantal tradition is worth serious and sustained consideration.

Because I judge this argument to be an important one in our vexed context, I am delighted that the book is now offered in a revised edition. I am grateful to Amy Erickson of the faculty of Iliff School of Theology (and my former student) for completing the revision; she is fully “up” on new emergents in both scripture study and educational theory and practice. I am equally grateful to Neil Elliott at Fortress Press for seeing this revision to its publication. I continue to remember the happy time at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary when I first presented the Caldwell Lectures that have eventuated in this book. While not a new argument, the book anticipates a major opportunity for fresh energy and courage for the educational task of the church. I am mindful that Jesus, according to Matthew,
designated his disciples as “scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:51-52). That is a generative image for our work in church education. Such scribes that served the new coming regime, he said, must bring forth from the treasure what is old and what is new. That is exactly how good biblical interpretation works, old traditions with new interpretations. Such education is an act of imagination that is formed and shaped for response to yearnings that are all around us. I am glad if this book serves that large vocation.

I write this on the day of the release of the US Senate study on the “Torture Program” of the CIA. Whatever may be made of the report and all sorts of political posturing that it will evoke, the report at least requires us to ask, “What has happened to us?” The answer is that we have forgotten our identity and our grounding, and are consequently in a freefall of fear and anxiety. It is a proper moment to mobilize the resources of the canonical tradition for such a time when we might remember, and therefore act and hope beyond our fears.

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