

One New Book for the Preacher

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Newell, J. Philip. *Christ of the Celts, The Healing of Creation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Early in his book, *Christ of the Celts, the Healing of Creation*, J. Philip Newell shares this story. At the end of a lecture he was giving in Lynchburg, Virginia, a woman in her eighties came up to speak to him. She was carrying an earlier book of his, and his talk had been focused on Celtic spirituality and the nature of God. The woman said to him, “I don’t normally write in the books that I read, but I want to show you what I’ve written in this book of yours.” And she opened the front cover to show him these words: “I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!” (p. 22). Since that is one response I enjoy getting to my sermons (the other being, “Wow, I never thought about that before.”), I was intrigued to see what Newell had to say.

In just over one hundred pages, Newell takes on much of the theology of traditional Western Christianity. He examines the doctrine of original sin, the nature of God and the relationship of Creator to creation, the connection between physical and spiritual reality, and atonement theory, to name a few. He uses as his foundation for this examination his understanding of Johannine theology, early Christianity, and Celtic spirituality.

The Celts, Newell points out, were once spread as far as modern day Turkey before they were driven back to the corners of Scotland and Ireland by the expansion of Greek and Roman Empires. And while Celtic spirituality before its contact with Christianity had some brutal manifestations, its expression early on in the Christian story provided a path for understanding Jesus and knowing God which can allow us as contemporary Christians to reconnect with ourselves, our world, and all of creation. In following this path, Newell not only takes issue with some common understandings of Christian doctrine, but also offers a way of speaking about the role of empire and political power in shaping those understandings.

This book engages the “theologian” side of our identity as preachers in a way that invites us to wrestle again with our most basic understandings of the Gospel. I find that such an exercise is always helpful for a preacher. We can get so caught up in our way of speaking and thinking that we are surprised when folks gaze back at us from the congregation with expressions that clearly demonstrate they don’t have any idea what we are talking about. This seems especially true during the season of Lent, when we are called on to interpret parts of our tradition that are often difficult: the meaning of Ash Wednesday and our own connection to “dust,” the nature of temptation and evil in the world, the crucifixion and its significance, and the reality of resurrection.

Similarly, we are all subject to the dominant images of the world in which we live. Without even realizing it, we can find ourselves repeating “conventional wisdom,” even when such conventions undermine the truth we have discovered at the heart of the Gospel. In looking again at the conventional teaching of Western Christianity, Newell gives us a path for clarifying for ourselves the good news we have to share.

To begin, Newell suggests that the doctrine of original sin, as it has been taught by the Western church since the fourth century, has actually alienated us from our Creator and from creation and deafened us to the good news of Jesus. This understanding of human nature, Newell says, gained strength when Rome began to use the Christian religion to solidify its political power. By teaching that human beings needed an outside source to rescue them from their basic evil nature, the Roman Empire could use the Roman Church to control the populations they defeated militarily. Employing a very familiar rationale used by empires throughout history, Rome could then present itself as liberator rather than conqueror, and could understand itself as bringing light and life rather than death and destruction, as it continued its expansion and domination.

However, such an understanding of what it means to be human has left us Christians in the twenty-first century alienated from ourselves and from the rest of creation and has often forced folks to choose between their own deep sense of life's meaning and the teachings of the church. Newell says, "The religious fare they have been offered contradicts some of their deepest knowing and hunger for the goodness of creation" (p. 35).

Instead, Newell says, when human nature is understood to be essentially good, then the message of the Gospel is an invitation to "remember who you are." Human beings do not have to turn away from themselves, but can instead, with Jesus, move more fully into the unity of life. It is helpful to note that Newell's rejection of the notion of original sin does not mean that he minimizes the reality and power of sin in the world. Human brokenness surrounds us, and we come to know it, and even participate in it, early in our lives. It is deeply intertwined with our sense of self. But what Jesus does, in this framework, is remind us that we are at the core beloved children of God. Jesus comes to show us what it means to be authentically and vulnerably human.

Newell then goes on to observe, "Just as the doctrine of original sin was a convenient dogma for an empire set on dominating the world and dictating truth to the masses, so the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* came into the service of a world power that was set on doing whatever it pleased to the earth" (p. 54). For our faith journey, Celtic Christianity reminds us that we have been given two books. The first is scripture, called "the little book" by Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena. The second, bigger book is the book of creation, of the universe. Newell cites sixth century Irish theologian Columbanus, who said if we want to know the Creator, we must come to know the creatures. Such an open understanding of God's revelation and such an honoring of creation, Newell contends, is always a threat to empirical power. And yet, the invitation to reconnect with creation and with our own "creatureliness" is another invitation to unity: "The creatures know the rhythm of the earth. They have not forgotten the oneness of which we are a part. So in the Celtic world, they are the messengers of Christ, the One who comes to reconnect us to the Heart of Being" (p. 44).

In such a context, Newell then tackles atonement theory, rejecting a substitutionary or "satisfaction" understanding of the death of Jesus. Here he employs some of the imagery of Julian of Norwich, offering an understanding of the cross as a sign of God's compassion. Again, Newell does not dismiss the depth of suffering represented by the cross, but he does offer a different understanding of that suffering: "Forgiveness

is not about payment. Never. It is about the free and costly opening of ourselves to one another. . .” (p. 85).

Newell’s personal stories add pastoral depth to his theological conversations. He blends insights from the wisdom of early Christian teachers such as Irenaeus with his own experiences growing up in a Christian home in Canada. He speaks in poignant ways about his childhood views of himself and of God, which focused on fear rather than on love. He tells of an adolescent experience of God’s mystical presence about which he has only recently begun to speak. He describes his feelings as a father and his ongoing journey of faith with those he calls his “companions of the soul.”

Any preacher knows what it is like to try to strike a balance between thorough investigation and concise argument, between the testimony of ancient witnesses and the stuff of one’s own spiritual journey. Newell’s arguments are simple and understandable. He cites early Christian writers, both canonical and non, as he makes his points. His ability to weave personal stories throughout his theological observations often makes this book read like an extended sermon. But it is a very good sermon. And while Newell does not offer rigorous scholarship within the text, his writing reflects some rigorous work, and his citations give us good directions for taking a similar journey.

As we enter the season of Lent, Newell’s book invites us to turn toward ancient wisdom to address contemporary issues. It invites us to rethink some of our ways of understanding and describing our Christian story. It invites us to reconsider the ways our worship words and actions reflect our faith. And in that invitation, Newell provides some good foundations for study, reflection, conversation, and preaching. He does it in a very readable and convincing way. As I finished his book, I found myself thinking, “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.”