

**Response to the Showers Lectures delivered by Don Rogers
at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio
October 2001**

**A response to the lectures from Irvin Batdorf,
Professor of New Testament Emeritus UTS**

Dear Don,

This is just a note to share my reflections with you now that I have listened to both of your Showers lectures. I was so glad to have had the tapes so I could hear the joy, the puckishness, the crusading vigor, the prophetic warning and sorrow that you poured into these lectures, and the humor! It was a great ride.

On the one hand you won't let go. You are describing what life should be both in church and seminary, line upon line, precept upon precept; accountability, humanity, mastery, expectation, incarnational "showing up". On the other hand, there is the deliciously wicked(?), inch by inch description of inertia incarnate, complacency, credential-seeking, system beating, dependent, other-directed, turf protective cloning, inaccessibility. But there is what I would also call prophetic lament. You wonder at the end what would happen if, given the opportunity at UTS to continue our mission, we find ourselves dead in the water, with out a keel. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to imagine ourselves being hailed into court before the bar of God, as Isaiah used to confront a rambunctious Israel.

Frankly, particularly with the second lecture following the first, you bowled me over. You took my breath away. I could now see with painful clarity how little I had ever thought of myself, in all my forty years of teaching, chiefly as a learner teaching students how to learn. Forty years is a long time to be so blind.

Now that you've got my attention, I would surely agree that teachers should be good learners, exhibit that publicly and be accessible day and night. But all along I

imagine that I was marching to a different drummer. I passionately desired students to become good interpreters of Scripture, loving exegetical labor as a major avenue through which to feed the flock. Learning was not an end in itself (it is possible to know too much!), but rather a necessary means to an honorable end. I would want, then, to affirm your vision for the Seminary as a teaching, learning, serving worshipping community but to claim such a vision as the fruit of the Gospel.

Please be clear that I aim not adding anything here but interpreting what I already see - and that in abundance!

In my book, while you do not use the word "Gospel" per se, you do use the vigorous language bred in the Gospel briar patch. You keep insisting on rousing expectations, taking responsibility, proceeding by linkages, modeling, mastery, praise and rehabilitation; and above all succumbing to the ambush of the Spirit. All that good stuff does not produce itself. In my view, only the Good News about Jesus' blood-red cross and resurrection could produce such fruit and have the power to break the control now exercised (I agree) by cultural, bureaucratic and personal inertia (the latter to be identified as original sin in a particularly virulent form).

I would concur that Jesus' success as a teacher rested in large part on the continuity of his experience with the twelve. But I would go on to point out that Jesus was in the business of forming the Messianic community, particularly in Matthew (chapter 16:13 - 20 and the whole of chapter 18). In the person of Peter this community would be sorely tested and reconstituted. For me this is the crux of the matter; the continuing presence of the risen Lord with those who teach. This is how I read Matthew 28:20; "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." In one exhilarating picture Matthew stretches the continuity of Jesus' presence with the disciples from Jesus' pre-resurrection ministry ("all that I have commanded you") to our time and beyond ("to the close of the age").

The presence of the risen Lord in the midst of those who teach has become, by Matthew's alchemy, the foundational structuring of that community. Matthew reiterates in chapter 28:20 what he had already announced in Chapter 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

Matthew, then, gives us great hope that the vision you have set before us can reach fulfillment. When the Messianic community becomes fully submissive to the tutelage of the risen Lord, there is always the possibility that the community may be freed from inertia and emerge as the teaching, learning, serving and worshipping community you envision. There the beatitudes would come to life. Those who hunger and thirst would be filled. Those who mourn would be comforted, The meek would inherit the earth. Little wonder that Matthew the teaching Evangelist says of him who presides over such a learning community: "He will not break the bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick" (Matt 12: 18 - 21.)

With Paul the reality falls far short of Matthew's blueprint. In the presence of exceptionally slow learners, who Paul classifies as "babes in Christ" (I Cor. 3:1 - 1), he continues doggedly to serve, planting and watering while God alone gives the growth. However disappointing, they are still God's field and God's building (I Cor. 3: 5 - 9). The Good News then is that the whole church, however disappointing, is nevertheless - would anyone believe it - the actual living body of Christ. Gifted according to faith by the full resources of Father, Son and Spirit (I Cor.. 12: 4 - 13), they nevertheless remain in dire need of constant admonition (I Cor. 12: 14 - 14: 39)

To put it another way - they are God's Temple, God's Spirit dwells in their midst. (I Cor. 3:16). But they are constantly subject to God's purging (I Cor. 3: 10 - 17). Upon them God has bestowed all the riches of the world (I Cor. 3: 21 - 23), but pride continues to tear them down. (I Cor. 4: 6 - 21) One suspects that without the keel of the Gospel, Paul's boat would capsize (I Cor. 1: 16- 2:16).

To sum up! I've learned in a new way from your lectures that Christian education is a way of life, not confined to the class room or to any one discipline, but rather a complete offering of ourselves to God (as the hymns, Taize and the prayer labyrinth bear witness). What I have been pushed to learn afresh from Matthew and Paul is that we are weak but He is strong. I conclude that our present malaise in United Methodism and the evil days that have fallen on United are to be seen as a time of God's purging, and what we hope for is something like a new birth (John) or a new creation (Paul). The question is not whether we can survive but whether in the simplicity of faith we will repent, allowing God to remold us in the image of His Son.

I want to acknowledge once again how refreshing this experience of sharing the Showers lecture has been and continue to be for me. You have fired a masterful salvo over the bow, which I earnestly hope will be heard.

More than that I must thank you for the gentleness with which you have treated me (clamoring to receive what I already had in hand!)... How good a teacher, friend and Christian brother you have been.'

Best ever, (and smooth sailing)

Irvin (Batdorf)

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