

# JAMES LODER'S REDEMPTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY



Dana R. Wright and John D. Kuentzel, eds. *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. Pp. xiv+455, ISBN 0-8028-2689-X.

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James Loder's death in 2001 threatened to end his influence on theology and the Church, but the collection of essays in *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology* is a sign that his work remains both studied and provocative. Consisting of sixteen essays written by former students and colleagues, *Redemptive Transformation (RT)*, admirably edited by Dana Wright and John Kuentzel, elucidates Loder's thought and its implications, and applies that thought to concrete issues. The book is an excellent reminder of the depth of writing and teaching of a man who credited Michael Polanyi with providing many insights on which his own work was based. After a summary of Loder's theology, extracted from a fine "Introduction" by the editors, this review will comment on the essays, with occasional remarks about their import.

James Loder was educated at Carleton College and then Princeton Theological Seminary. Two crucial events of his seminary years were the death of his father, which occasioned despair and then a transforming experience of God's presence, and his discovery of Kierkegaard, who became a major influence on his thinking (*RT*, 14). At Harvard's Graduate School, Loder received a Ph.D. in the history and philosophy of religion, studying with some of the brightest stars in theology and the social sciences. His dissertation on the imagination in Freud and Kierkegaard began a life-long effort to connect these disciplines that culminated in his 1992 volume, written with physicist James Niedhardt, *The Knight's Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard).

In 1962 Loder returned to Princeton Seminary, where he would teach until his death almost forty years later, becoming known as a master of the Socratic method

in the classroom, with a personal, challenging teaching style. This style crystalized for Loder after 1970 because of a terrible life-threatening traffic accident that forced him “to radically reconsider the very core of his self-understanding and the meaning of his life’s vocation” (*RT*, 15). The accident was a genuine epiphany, leading him to re-cast his thinking about personal development from a psychoanalytic to a more theological perspective, even though this “turn to the Spirit” brought criticism from his academic colleagues for its “mystical, emotional” overtones (*RT*, 16). Loder summarized this experience by saying he had been “convicted,” and “the whole convictional picture...began to become a way for me to talk about what I know had happened” (quoted, *RT*, 15). The result of this event was a re-thinking of assumptions about reality undergirding his work in the social sciences at Harvard, which was dictated by critical philosophy’s reduction of human experience to physical phenomena that could be explicitly analyzed by science.

In a process somewhat parallel to Michael Polanyi’s re-examination of objectivism in the natural sciences, Loder saw that his earlier work had been undermined by the assumption of the modern worldview that religious experience was meaningless, even before examination of that experience. The reason for this judgment was that naturalistic science operates from assumptions about reality that cannot be examined scientifically. To Loder’s credit, he did not simply bask in the glow of his convictional experience of God’s presence, but spent a decade attempting to clarify the proper relationship of theological knowing to the social sciences and published his findings in his 1981 book, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed., (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard). For many scholars, including this reviewer, James Loder was initially discovered through this book, which still seems to be his best known.

Loder described the purpose of *The Transforming Moment* (*TM*) several different ways in the opening chapters, the shortest being to find “a new understanding of knowing commensurate with the nature of convictional experience” (*TM*, 21). He sometimes called this effort “epistemological,” and he was aware of the need to situate this view of knowing in relation to science; in relation to postmodernism’s critique of modernity; and in relation to the kind of transformational moment he himself had experienced. Though the richness of Loder’s account is beyond the scope of this review, we do need to mention three features of his work assumed by the authors of *Redemptive Transformation*. First, Loder articulated a five-step “logic of transformation” underlying all moments of discovery or true insight: (1) a problem presents itself as *conflict-in-context*: a confusion, an incoherence that may be largely unconscious; (2) there is an *interlude for scanning*, in which the individual’s spirit tries to resolve this problem; (3) the person achieves an *insight felt with intuitive force*, that is, a surprising ‘key’ is found to unlock the phenomenon she was trying to open—a moment of discovery; (4) this discovery is made by investing great effort in the search, so that “when the constructive

resolution appears, there is a release of energy bound up with the conflict” (*TM*, 4). This *release and repatterning* redirects the flow of energy into finding the ways in which the new resolution “fits;” and (5) the human spirit’s desire for completion moves the knower to *interpretation and verification* of the new insight, placing the discovery into a communal or public realm where it can be affirmed by others (*TM*, 3-4).

Though he referred to scientific discovery as one illustration of this logic of transformation at work, Loder’s primary examples were from spiritual life: he first noted Kierkegaard’s 1838 experience of overwhelming joy in “the Power that posits the self.” Though he refers to this experience only briefly in his journals, it seems to have been a lifelong touchstone of Kierkegaard’s faith. The second example was Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, in which conflicting forces were resolved by God’s speaking to him in an especially powerful, transformative way. In addition to this *transformative* process, Loder argued that a new way of knowing will also be *four-dimensional*, and here his knowledge of psychotherapy becomes clear: “Being human,” he wrote, “entails environment, selfhood, the possibility of not being, and the possibility of new being. All four dimensions are essential, and none of them can be ignored without decisive loss to our understanding of what is essentially human” (*TM*, 69). So in addition to an epistemological background, Loder also placed knowing within the psychological context of the individual’s development, her effort to feel at home in the world.

And finally, a full account of human knowing will be not just transformative and four-dimensional, but also *Christocentric*, moving beyond the human sphere to its ultimate ground in God in Christ. True knowledge is knowledge of *reality*, not information, and as it is Christ who reveals to human beings what is finally real, human knowledge must be transfigured, that is, undergo “illumination and divination of an otherwise unenlightened or mundane phenomenon” (*TM*, 43). All knowledge follows the logic of transformation, but the deepest level of knowledge is the reality of Christ. Here then is the very rich understanding that Loder placed before his readers, particularly before those young seminarians who were studying with him. Traditionally, practical theology includes the sub-disciplines of pastoral theology, homiletics (preaching), and Christian education, and it is rare to find a teacher of practical theology establishing such a systematic foundation for the discipline in philosophy, psychology, and theology. In *Redemptive Transformation*, thinkers steeped in Loder’s approach attempt to show the potential and pertinence of his work for the concrete practices of the Church, from baptism and the eucharist to prayer and preaching. Loder’s vision was ambitious, and it is fitting that these essays are equally ambitious in applying it to revitalize Christian practice today.

The essays are organized into three divisions, “Redemptive Transformation *within* Ecclesial Praxis,” “...*of* Practical Theology,” and “...*beyond* Practical Theology,” which

are helpful though not essential rubrics—some essays could fit into more than one category. After the introduction by the editors summarized above, the first division has six essays showing how Loder’s thought can enliven practices of baptism, the Eucharist, preaching, biblical study, leadership, and youth ministry—all of which can “powerfully challenge the domesticating forces at work in congregations today” (*RT*, 25). The essays vary in the degree of closeness to Loder’s thought, from closely in Russell Haitch’s discussion of baptism to quite distant in John Hastings’ treatment of religious language. I applaud these attempts to apply Loder’s vision to concrete practices of the Church, but doubt that most pastors and ministers of education could appreciate the sometimes dense, occasionally convoluted academic writing without a great deal of help. A brief description of the essays will give a sense of this division of the book.

Haitch’s essay on baptism, “‘Trampling Down Death by Death’: Double Negation in Developmental Theory and Baptismal Theology,” employs a central concept of Loder’s, that of “double negation” (*RT*, 43-68). An infant is totally focused on the mother who gives it nourishment, and particularly on her face, which is her loving presence for him. In time, however, he becomes aware that the mother is sometimes absent, and “*anxiety over absence* becomes the central feature and gripping conflict of the infant’s life.” The precariousness of this situation leads the child to search for a solution, which leads to his learning to say *No*—“no—not you, but me” (*RT*, 45). The child would like to say “Yes” to the mother, but the anxiety of absence is too intense, and so the child affirms itself over against the mother, beginning the process of creating an ego. Though this ego “is the most remarkable creation of the human spirit,” its foundation is negative, repressing the natural desire to love and to receive love, and this process continues for a lifetime. In order to be transformed into full human identity, this negation must itself be negated, which can only be accomplished in its fullest sense by the Holy Spirit: “As the Holy Spirit negates and reconstitutes the negation-based ego of the human spirit, so likewise are the ‘ego defenses’ transformed when the self is centered in Christ” (*RT*, 47). Or, in the language of Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2.19-20). The various negative strategies which the ego uses to protect itself—repression, projection, denial, fantasy formation, reaction formation—are overcome when the self is centered in Christ (*RT*, 47). Though Haitch occasionally becomes tangled in these concepts (“...the child learning to say ‘no’ would represent a negation of this double negation, and then the subsequent presence of the divine Face would be the ultimate double negation of the child’s negation of the mother’s double negation” [*RT*, 49]), he does creatively relate the immersion of baptism to the (symbolic) death of the sinner. Thus baptism represents a “double negation” in which separation from God, the spiritual death which stalks all humans aware of their mortality, is overcome by the death of Christ, which brings about a restoration of a relationality with God, that is, a new life.

Marilyn McCord Adams' essay on the Eucharist, "Biting and Chomping our Salvation: Holy Eucharist, Radically Understood," is philosophically sophisticated, as we would expect, though less directly related to Loder's work, with which she disagrees in places. She tries to recover the ancient theory sometimes called *impanation*—the "embreadment," one might say—of the Divine Word in the bread of the Eucharist, in parallel to *incarnation*. Her larger goal is to affirm that the real physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a natural result of God's salvific intent in creation to 'mix it up' with matter, leading to a new emphasis on *embodiment* within theology and in Christian practice. "Like the incarnation, literal location where the bread and wine seem to be, is a concession to our condition: in the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ come to meet us literally where we are" (*RT*, 87). With a new approach to our embodied nature, "biting and chomping" the 'bread nature' of Christ in communion puts believers into a relationship with Christ that may be flawed as to etiquette, but is much more real.

John McClure, in "The Way of Love: Loder, Levinas, and Ethical Transformation through Preaching," attempts an interweaving of ethics, homiletics and hermeneutics through the work of Loder, Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Brueggemann, Jacques Derrida, and Rebecca Chopp. It is not an essay for the faint-hearted, as it uses the idiosyncratic vocabulary of each of these thinkers to probe a special transforming moment, "the moment when preaching begins to move both preacher and hearers onto the holy ground of love" (*RT*, 97). McClure moves from Brueggemann's view of preaching as *testimony*, to the work of Levinas in which testimony becomes an ethical act of justice allowing the other to be. He then employs Chopp's theology of the Word of God as "a perfectly open sign" that requires even our most radical commitment to the freedom of the other, transforming our ego obsessions into other-directedness, to be "crucified (i.e., torn up) by the Word, by its perfect openness," just as Loder argues that even our human transformations must be transformed by the Spirit of Christ (*RT*, 108-110).

The fourth essay in this section, "Transforming Encounter in the Borderlands: A Study of Matthew 15:21-28" by Daniel Schipani, takes up a suggestion by Loder to apply transformational logic to the reading of scripture, specifically the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew. Schipani's reading employs Latin American liberationist approaches that focus on *seeing, judging, and acting*, and therefore has a clear pastoral purpose. He shows the usefulness of the five stages of Loder's transformational logic, and how the marginal, vulnerable Canaanite woman negates the negativity of Jewish stereotypes that Jesus initially greets her with (*RT*, 131).

Robert Martin's essay, "Leadership and Serendipitous Discipleship: A Case Study of Congregational Transformation," moves beyond the application of Loder's transformational logic to individuals, which dominates most essays, and applies it to community, showing that group dynamics can also be illuminated by his thought.<sup>1</sup> Against the

“corporate model” of church leadership, Martin introduces the model of “serendipitous discipleship” as it emerged in a church in Auburn, Nebraska, though this model remains somewhat amorphous in the essay. After telling the story of the church’s struggle to work through a pastor’s illness, he applies Loder’s five stages (conflict-in-context, interlude for scanning, etc.) to analyze it, ending with lessons about leadership drawn from the case study.

The last essay in this section of the book is by Dana Wright, using a book by Kenda Creasy Dean, and it examines “Youth, Passion, and Intimacy in the Context of Koinonia.” Here Jim Loder’s passionate personality and his concern for the ego development of individuals combine in a new treatment of ‘youth culture.’ Loder’s response to young people is to affirm their passion, and to critique the “dispassionate dishonesty and lack of integrity that passes for ‘maturity’ in our culture....” Using Talcott Parsons, Loder criticizes the Church for following society’s “tension-reduction, pattern-maintenance” prescription for social order, “thus domesticating the church’s potential for prophetic witness to society” (*RT*, 155). Teenagers have a powerful ability to detect dishonesty: “One way they fight social conformity to the church is by leaving spiritually domesticated congregations in droves” (*RT*, 158). Following Loder’s claim that teenage identity is a theological as well as a psychological issue, Wright shows how an understanding of transformation can provide a way for the church to be itself transformed by Christ, infusing new life into a community that has rejected ultimate allegiance to the *status quo*.

The second division of the book, “Redemptive Transformation of Practical Theology,” focuses a bit more on the principles *behind* practical theology rather than its application to specific rituals of the church. Using and critiquing the thought of Craig Dykstra rather than that of Loder, Susanne Johnson shows how “Remembering the Poor,” can be a test case for the depth of the Church’s understanding of the call of Christ. In a passionate indictment of American Christianity’s collusion with a globalized economy and consumer culture, she rejects a standard *service paradigm* for relating to the poor, in favor of a *faith-based community revitalization paradigm*, in which the poor do not simply receive the largesse of the powerful, but find their voice in a collective critique of ideology, thus uncovering the roots of their poverty (*RT*, 189-215).

Dana Wright’s “Paradigmatic Madness and Redemptive Creativity in Practical Theology” recapitulates much of the “Introduction” and the “Afterward” to the book, setting out an overview of Loder’s thought, which, given the complexity of that thought, is welcome. The specific vehicle for this version of the story is Paul’s letter to the Ephesians—Wright argues “that the kind of fiduciary concern that created canonical Ephesians...is discernable as well in Loder’s neo-Chalcedonian science, which he developed in response to the crisis he indwelt—that is, the...need to reclaim... the church’s life and witness in a radically uncertain postmodern world” (*RT*, 219).

Loder's own conviction through the accident of 1970 showed him the inadequacy of a "Parsonian-sized practical theological theory," and helped him see "the profound theo-anthropological difference between therapeutic creativity and redemptive transformation" (*RT*, 247-248).

Thomas John Hastings focuses on religious language in "George Lindbeck and Thomas F. Torrance on Christian Language and the Knowledge of God," reacting to "the fragmenting drift of postmodern Protestantism into the competing options of orthodoxy, experimentalism, and activism..." (*RT*, 252). Hastings critiques Lindbeck's method and proposal for ecumenical dialogue while approving Torrance's, but does not attempt to relate his discussion to Loder.

"Transformational logic" is examined "in story form" in Margaret Krych's essay, "Transformational Narrative in a Non-Transformational Tradition." Using an anthropological study of folklore and mythology, Krych argues that a "semantic mediator" is a necessary element in a transformational narrative, the mediator stepping in to accomplish what the agent could not do on her own. This mediator "bears the pattern or 'grammar' of the Holy Spirit who transforms our situation...and brings us to the convictional knowing of faith" (*RT*, 282-83). She then applies this understanding to the Lutheran tradition, which does not share Loder's "anthropological optimism;" it sees sanctification "less as transformation and more as a daily return to the good Word of justification, of God's mercy in forgiving sin" (*RT*, 286). Loder sees the transformational process ending "with the agent having a permanent life-changing experience." The Lutheran emphasis on human sin rejects that possibility, so that the transforming experience will have to be repeated "daily, hourly, constantly" (*RT*, 295-96).

In one of the more important essays in the volume, Russell Haitch gives "A Summary of James E. Loder's Theory of Christian Education," which was contained in a manuscript almost finished at Loder's death but not yet published, titled "Educational Ministry in the Logic of the Spirit." His essay is important because it presents the signal contribution of Loder to this important topic in practical theology. A distinction between "socialization," the standard model in the field, and "transformation" is Loder's first step in reforming Christian education, which replaces a natural progression of the human agent through various stages of maturity with the Holy Spirit's transformation of the individual: "This is our epistemology. For all that pertains to teaching and learning in the Christian context, our fundamental epistemology and guiding assumption has to be: The Holy Spirit leads us into all Truth" (quoted in *RT*, 306). The remainder of the essay shows how Loder's view of education is *transformational, four dimensional, and christocentric*.

The last division, "Redemptive Transformation *beyond* Practical Theology" contains three essays which extend Loder's thought philosophically and theologically. LeRon Shults gives helpful background to a central Loderian concept in "The Philosophical



Turn to Relationality,” tracing this term from its suppression by Plato and Aristotle to its elevation by Emmanuel Levinas (*RT*, 325-46). John Kuentzel excavates another crucial term of Loder in “The Heidegger in Loder (or, How the Nothing Became the Void).” Noting that Loder often used Heidegger’s *What is Metaphysics?* as a classroom text, Kuentzel begins with an extensive, careful presentation of Heidegger’s thought, noting along the way where Loder used similar concepts. Though there are important differences between Heidegger’s *nothing* and Loder’s *void*, there is clearly kinship, and not only in their common origin in Kierkegaard. The crucial difference is that for Loder, the experience of the void is overcome by transformation in the Holy Spirit, a step which Heidegger does not take (*RT*, 366). The last part of the essay discusses the sense of wonder that arises from the experience of the void, and is a central ingredient of education. Finally, Eolene Boyd-MacMillan shows that Loder’s transformational logic connects naturally with mysticism in “Loder and Mystical Spirituality: Particularity, Universality, and Intelligence.” Using four contemporary scholars of mysticism (Louth, McGinn, Turner, and McIntosh) to establish a consensus view of the nature of mysticism, Boyd-MacMillan describes the “deep, transforming encounter with God” that is mysticism as an alternate form of Loder’s “transformation in the Holy Spirit,” and then shows how Loder’s logic of transformation can aid discourse about particularity and universality, that is, whether the object of the mystic’s devotion is the same in different traditions. She then concludes with a discussion of how, for both mysticism and Loder, creative intelligence should be understood as a form of love: “love itself is a knowing” (*RT*, 373-400).

The volume concludes with an “Afterward” by Dana Wright that tries, with only partial success, to explain the senses in which Loder’s work can truly be called “scientific,” and with a helpful bibliography of Loder’s publications and writing about him. The Afterward repeats some things that Wright has already said in the introduction and in his essay on youth ministry, but adds, on p. 417, thirteen ways in which Loder illuminates “actual Reality,” though he does not unpack this list. In the last part of the essay, he discusses sixteen “potential challenges” of Loder’s work to practical theology, and though he does explicate these challenges, it still seems a somewhat anxious, thrown-together effort to show that James Loder’s work is relevant to contemporary theological and philosophical discourse. The entire collection of essays, however, establishes Loder’s importance through the inspiration he has given to many scholars working on a wide variety of issues, such that the Afterword seems unnecessary.

Though *Redemptive Transformation* is quite long, this review should not be, so let me close with brief observations. As the first full-scale treatment of James Loder’s work, *Redemptive Transformation* is an important book, well worth reading. Its great virtue is the variety and quality of the essays, which is quite high. Its weakness is an uncertainty about audience, so that while most of the essays will be welcomed by practitioners in



ministry, there are several (Wright, Haitch, Adams, McClure, for example) that are exceedingly dense, and probably unhelpful to those same practitioners. Loder's background in psychotherapy adds a dimension to his post-critical thought that Michael Polanyi lacks, though this seems insufficient to term his thought "scientific." Most important: the authors will stimulate readers to turn again, or for the first time, to Loder's books, and that in itself makes their effort quite successful.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Readers of *TAD* will be interested to know that Martin's Princeton dissertation under Loder was on the thought of Michael Polanyi and Thomas Torrance.